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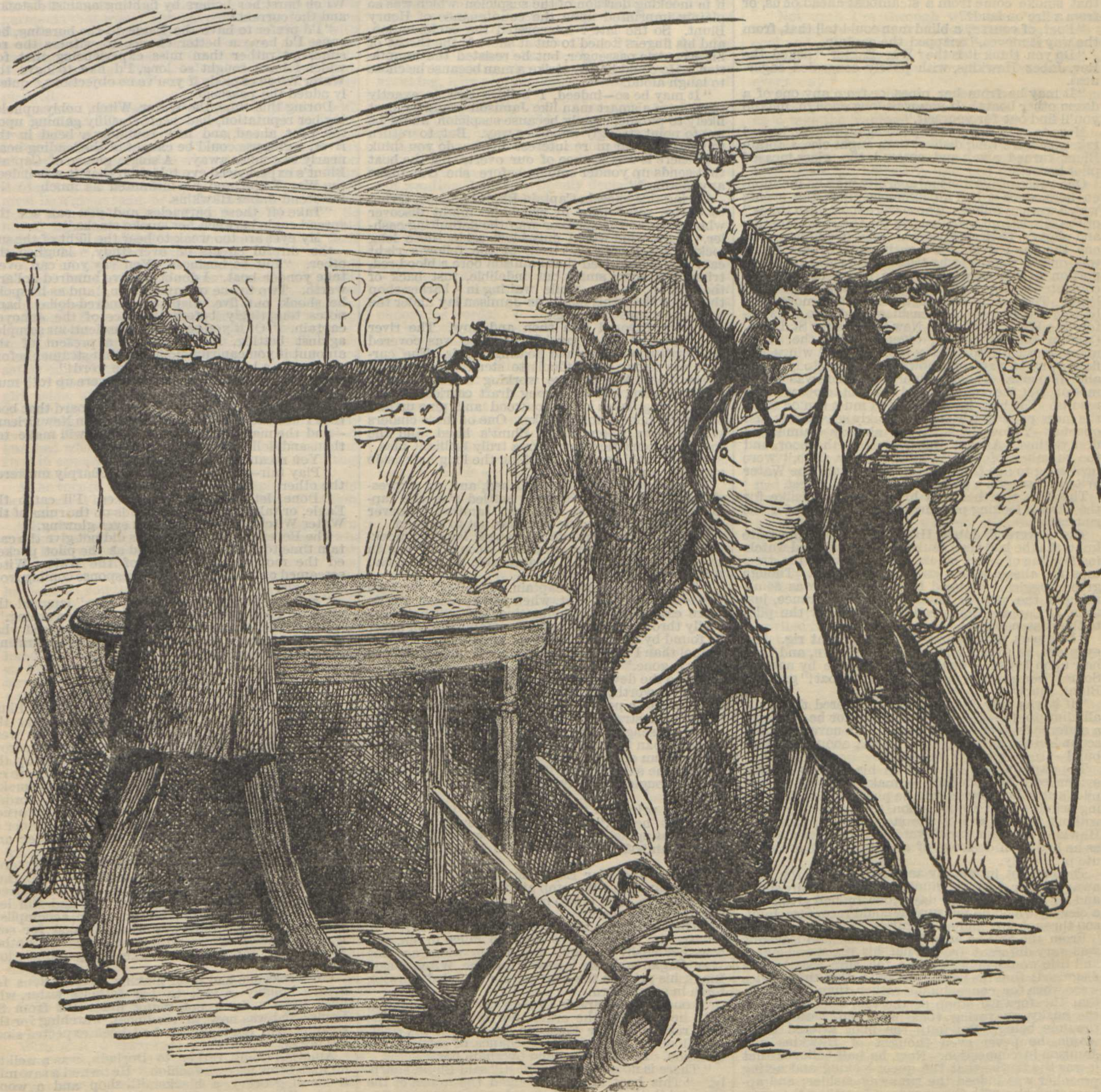
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No. 71

CAPTAIN COOL BLADE; or, THE MAN-SHARK OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, Jr.,

AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL GEORGE," "THE BOY JOCKEY," ETC., ETC.



"TAKE ONE STEP FORWARD, JACQUES BOUCHIER, AND, BY THE HORN OF GABRIEL! I'LL SCATTER YOUR BRAINS TO THE FOUR WINDS!"

Captain Cool Blade;

OR,

The Man-Shark of the Mississippi.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
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CHAPTER I.

AN ECCENTRIC PASSENGER.

"CAPTAIN, can you tell me the nature of that smoke rising up yonder?"

These words were uttered in a peculiar, husky voice, and with a manner so respectful, as to be almost timid. They were addressed to Henry Blunt, captain of the "Water Witch," then acknowledged queen of the lower Mississippi.

Blunt by name and blunt by nature was the sturdy captain, and his *nom de guerre* of "Old Rough and Ready," aptly described his bluff, straight-forward nature. Yet he was a gentleman to the core, and had almost any other one of his present passengers asked him that question, a prompt and cordial answer would have been given. Instead, there came a short, explosive grunt, that shadowed forth the strong aversion with which the Reverend Jabez Hawkins had inspired him, from the moment that gentleman stepped aboard the steamboat at New Orleans.

"A wolf in sheep's clothing—a p'izen hawk on the look-out for stray pigeons!" was his mental summing up after one keen glance at the clerical passenger, and a few men could read human nature better than Captain Blunt.

"I beg your pardon, captain," added the passenger, "but I am rather hard of hearing, and did not exactly catch your meaning. If you would kindly repeat your answer, a trifle louder?"

"What is it you want?" sharply.

"That smoke, yonder—"

"Yes, it is smoke, and it comes from a fire."

"Smoke generally does, I believe," said the passenger, dryly; "but what I wished to learn was, does that smoke come from a steamboat ahead of us, or from a fire on land?"

"Boat, of course; a blind man could tell that, from the way it moves," snapped the captain.

"Do you think it is the 'War Eagle'?" asked the Rev. Jabez Hawkins, with poorly concealed eagerness.

"It may be from her pipes, or from any one of a dozen other boats. If you wait long enough, maybe you'll find out for yourself."

More to escape from the passenger to whom he had taken such a strong dislike, than aught else, Captain Blunt turned away and entered the glass-encased pilot-house.

One cause of his unusual acerbity may be mentioned here, since it had an influence upon the events which were to follow. Those were the "flush times" of the Mississippi, particularly for the river captains and pilots. Their wages ran from five hundred to one thousand dollars a month, and Captain Blunt was one of the few who "salted down" the larger portion of his salary, until he had a comfortable competence drawing interest in a bank of New Orleans. Then, as now, though fortunately more rarely, there were defaulting cashiers, and two days before the Water Witch left New Orleans for St. Louis, Captain Blunt's money, together with the all of many another unfortunate, took to itself wings and flew away to parts unknown, in the custody of an able financier. The machinery of justice was put in motion, but the captain could not wait to observe the results. The boat he commanded must run on time, the more particularly that the sickly season was just opening—Yellow Jack having already claimed its first victims. All but the poorest of the poor, and the members of the "Can't-get-away Club," were hastening to flee from the fever-lands, and the Water Witch must reap a portion of the rich harvest.

This loss, together with his instinctive dislike for the clerical looking passenger, must account for his rudeness.

The Reverend Jabez Hawkins did not appear to know that he had been snubbed, but continued watching the line of black smoke that lay upon the treetops far ahead, with a strange intentness. Though green goggles concealed his eyes, there was something of the wolf or hawk in his appearance, just then, as Captain Blunt called attention of the pilot to the passenger.

"I've seen him before, but not in that rig. His eyes are as sound and keen as my own, and that hair upon his face was never put there by nature. Some p'izen gambler or runaway cutthroat!" growled Blunt, sourly.

"If it was only Jamison, now!" uttered the pilot, alluding to the defaulting cashier, for he, too, was a sufferer from the same cause. "I never saw the scoundrel but a few times. He was about the same build—are you sure it isn't him?"

The captain was not sure, as his actions clearly evidenced. Not pausing to make a reply to the pilot's startling suggestion, he pushed back the sliding window, and leaped upon the hurricane deck without making use of the steps. He approached Hawkins, as eager to cultivate his acquaintance now as he had been desirous of avoiding him but a minute previously.

Though not intimately acquainted with the runaway cashier, Captain Blunt knew him well by sight, and an accident in the days gone by had given him a clew by which he felt sure he could recognize Jamison through any and all disguises.

From the first he had believed this man Hawkins was very different from what his registered name and title would indicate. He felt sure that he was disguised; that his beard was false, that the goggles were worn for concealment rather than necessity, that the forward stoop of the tall, lithe form, and the husky, quavering voice were only assumed for the time being. But until the pilot uttered those words, he never even thought of Hawkins and Jamison in connection. Now, he half-believed that it was the truth—that the queer-looking and acting preacher was indeed the runaway cashier; and approached him with the purpose of settling the question of identity.

Deeply absorbed though the passenger was in watching the smoke line ahead, he cast a quick, sidelong glance toward the captain as he sprang from the pilot-house, and one hand was slipped into the breast of his tight-fitting black frock-coat. Captain Blunt saw this significant motion, and read it aright. Reverend Jabez Hawkins did not seem wholly inclined to trust to his cloth for protection. The action was that of a man who carried his life in his hand, and one who was no stranger to sudden, deadly assaults.

Captain Blunt paid no attention to this silent hint, but, determined to solve the mystery of the disguised passenger, if possible, he resumed the subject he had so unceremoniously terminated a few moments before.

"I asked Sam Ellis, the pilot, what he thought of yonder smoke, and it is his opinion that it comes from the War Eagle's furnace. You seemed so anxious to find out, that I thought it no more than fair to come and tell you."

"But you are not certain?"

"No; I didn't even know that the War Eagle was ahead of us. I've had much to trouble me, and did not pay much attention to what was going on around me. You know about Jamison?"

This question was sharply enunciated, and as he spoke, Captain Blunt eyed his passenger very closely, feeling sure that if his suspicions were correct, the criminal would betray himself. There was a slight start at the words, but that might be accounted for on the score of nervousness, the query was so sharply put.

"The defaulting cashier? yes," slowly responded the Reverend Jabez Hawkins. "Am I to understand that you are one of his victims?"

"To the tune of thirty thousand dollars—that's all," bitterly muttered the river captain. "Of course you have no idea where he has gone?"

"The general belief is that he left aboard one of the coasters, stowed away in the hold, by a confederate, most likely."

"I believe he played a bolder role—that he disguised himself and took passage up the river, on some one of the steamboats."

Once more the passenger gave a start, and the green goggles turned full upon the face of the captain, but a low laugh came from the bearded lips as if in mocking derision of the suspicion which was so plainly imprinted upon the countenance of Henry Blunt. So the latter interpreted the cachinnation, and his fingers itched to cut it short in the throat of his eccentric passenger, but he resisted the temptation. He could hardly strike a man because he chose to laugh aloud.

"It may be so—indeed, I believe that is exactly the course a smart man like Jamison would be most likely to pursue, simply because suspicion would be apt to point strongly the other way. But, to return to what is of far more interest to me, do you think that there is any chance of our overtaking the boat that sends up yonder smoke, before she can make any landing?"

During this speech, Captain Blunt had been trying to devise some plan by which he might discover whether or no the speaker was the defaulting cashier. If the wind would only blow aside those long locks of black hair, just back of the fellow's right ear! He had noticed that Jamison bore a blood-red, triangular scar, small but indelible, just back of that organ. It was while waiting in a barber-shop that he noticed this mark, as Jamison lay under the hands of a tonsorial artist.

Chance favored him then and now. The river was high, and still rising. Its surface was covered with driftwood, foam and floating debris. The current was strong and difficult to stem. The engines of the Water Witch were working under a heavy head of steam, and the strong draft carried cinders and burning flakes of cottonwood and pine up and out of the huge smoke-stacks. One of these cinders settled down upon Henry Blunt's hand, and the scorching sensation gave him a truly brilliant idea.

"Look out!" he cried, brushing the long hair aside with his hand. "A cinder—"

The sentence was left unfinished, and an expression of blank disappointment settled over the captain's face. This man was not Jamison, whoever else he might be, for the scar was not to be seen.

Once more the strange passenger laughed mockingly, and in a clear, musical voice that was in strong contrast to the disagreeable tones he had hitherto used, said:

"The scar is lacking, captain. I am not the man you took me to be. Yet, when you have had a little more experience in man-hunting, you will not be so easily thrown off your balance. Jamison will never be found by means of that scar, unless he is a greater fool than I take him to be. A little paint, and the mark is gone."

"Who the devil are you, anyhow?"

"An unworthy follower in the footsteps of John the Baptist—a poor shepherd whose mission it is to bring back straying sheep to the fold," droned the queer passenger, through his nose, ending with a hollow groan that evidently was drawn up from the very bottom of his stomach.

"For the sake of your fleece, no doubt," muttered Blunt, though not fully recovered from his discomfort.

"I'm a prince in disguise, traveling incog., if you like that better," laughed the Reverend Jabez. "But jesting aside, do you think we will overtake that steamboat? We appear to be gaining upon her."

"If it is the War Eagle, no; not before she has made a landing. We stop at Brown's Landing, but she does not. She is two miles ahead; the Landing not more than ten."

"This boat is too slow to overtake her, then?"

"No, sir; we can give her two miles in ten, and beat her easily enough. Big as her wings are, the War Eagle can't fly away from the Witch," said Blunt, his pride in the boat he commanded showing forth in every word.

"I once heard Captain Craven say the same thing, only he reversed the order; nor is he the only one that rates the War Eagle as the head of the river. You'll never have a better chance of settling the question. Put on steam and overhaul her."

"There is no question about it," said Blunt, sharply. "This boat is acknowledged the queen of the river, while the War Eagle is only a second rater."

"Then why are you afraid—"

"Easy, there! Don't presume too far on the black coat and white choker which you have donned, for no good purpose, I'll lay. It is none of your business, anyway, but I'll satisfy you. The Witch has beaten the Eagle too often for her to gain any credit by doing the same now. I have a valuable freight, and my cabin's full of passengers. The river is up a-booming, and in no fit condition for racing. There's reasons enough for satisfying a greater fool than you are."

"And the most convincing one of all is held in reserve—fear of failure," said Hawkins, with an irritating laugh. "I don't blame you for talking up your boat, captain, but I still pin my faith to the old Eagle—proud bird of freedom! More than that, I am ready to put up money to back my opinion," he added, producing a plump wallet and extracting therefrom a large roll of notes. "Two to one that you can't overtake that boat—providing it is the War Eagle—before she reaches her next port. Name your figures; let the pilot be stakeholder—and I'll cover the money."

Captain Blunt was not what is called a betting man, but here he was doubly tempted. The speed of his boat—loved quite as dearly as wife and children could have been—was questioned. He knew that he could win the money, and the wager was almost forced upon him; that, too, by a man whom he instinctively disliked.

"Why are you so anxious to catch the Eagle? If it was running away from the boat, I could understand that readily enough, by supposing a sheriff aboard her."

"Sharp, if not complimentary, but words break no bones. And yet, I don't see why I should keep it a secret. Know, then, that I have spent a moderate fortune every year in traveling back and forth upon this river, for the express purpose of witnessing—a steamboat explosion."

This startling revelation was given in a tone of such preternatural gravity that for a moment Captain Blunt stared at the speaker in open-eyed amazement, almost doubting the evidence of his ears. But then he saw the point, and was rather amused than otherwise by the cool impudence of the fellow.

"And you hope to gratify your curiosity by badgering me into racing with that boat—to have the Witch burst her boilers by fighting against distance and the current?"

"I'd prefer to have the Eagle do the bursting, because I'd have a better chance to witness the results, but rather than miss experiencing that for which I have sought so long, I'd like to have the Water Witch explode, if you've no objections," quietly added the passenger.

During this time, the Water Witch, nobly upholding her reputation, had been steadily gaining upon the boat ahead, and now rounding a bend in the river, a glimpse could be caught of the leading boat, nearly two miles away. A single glance of Captain Blunt's experienced eye told him that it was indeed the War Eagle, and he intimated as much to the Reverend Jabez Hawkins.

"Take off those barnacles, and you can see the spread eagle between her smoke-stacks."

"My eyes are too weak to bear the light of the sun—the direful effects of over-study," laughed the other. "But to business. You say you can overtake yonder boat. I doubt it—five hundred dollars' worth. Two to one on my opinion," and as he spoke he shook out five crisp one-hundred-dollar bank notes temptingly before the face of the annoyed captain. "Or if you have any conscientious scruples against betting, I'll make you a present of the amount if you can run alongside that steamer before she makes a landing. Sharp's the word!"

"If I only knew what game you were up to!" muttered Blunt, hesitatingly.

"You can guess. There's a man aboard that boat that I want to see. He absconded from New Orleans—and the man that takes him back will make ten thousand dollars by the operation."

"You mean Alfred Jamison?"

"Play fair—the game is mine," sharply muttered the other.

"Done! let Ellis hold the stakes. I'll catch the Eagle, or take a trip to the clouds on the ruins of the Water Witch!" cried Blunt, his eyes glowing.

The Reverend Jabez Hawkins did not give the captain time to alter his mind, and as the pilot pocketed the money, the whistle of the Water Witch screamed out shrilly, a prompt response coming from the Eagle.

"She knows we're after her, now," laughed the pilot. "That's our rule of honor—a fair warning."

But as the Reverend Jabez Hawkins realized what the pilot meant, a very unclerical oath broke gratingly from his bearded lips.

CHAPTER II.

HOT HEADS AND NIMBLE FISTS.

At the same moment when Captain Henry Blunt gave the word to signal the War Eagle that the Water Witch was about to chase her, there were eager eyes watching for the first-named boat, from Colby's Landing, a goodly number of miles up the river. Only one pair among the dozen, that were eager, impatient, longing to distinguish the first smoke-wreath above and beyond the tree-tops that bordered the turbid stream. Others were frequently turned down-stream, but as often returned to the owner of those glowing, restless orbs—a far pleasanter and more satisfying object.

Only a backwoods girl—child of rude, unlettered parents who had lived in the lowlands until they had grown almost as grizzled as the mossy trees around them; with little book-learning and still less of what is comprised in the vague term, accomplishments—Dorinda Colby was a sight good for sore eyes; a child of nature, with just enough of Mother Eve in her composition to make her genuinely lovable.

For weeks she had been making preparations for a rare holiday—a visit to her father's sister, who lived upon a farm not many miles out from St. Louis—and was now in readiness, watching for the steamer War Eagle, which had been expected since daybreak.

Amariah Colby, father to Dorinda, was a well-to-do man after his own fashion. He owned a saw-mill, a small grocery, a blacksmith-shop and a wood-yard. His own dwelling, with three smaller log cabins, which were occupied by his hired hands and

their families, with the other structures, comprised all there was of Colby's Landing.

The War Eagle was one of the boats that always took on wood at his yard, and for this reason it had been chosen to convey Dorinda up the river to her destination.

The day was the Sabbath, the grocery was closed, the saw-mill silent. Amariah Colby would not sell even whisky or tobacco—those two great staples of such a community—on Sunday. By such a course he gained great credit with his rough customers, and was looked upon with no little respect as a "religious sort o' cuss."

How well that respect was deserved, let the sequel show.

Among the half-score of men present, there were at least three who, as the reader who follows the course of this narrative to its end will meet with them more or less frequently, require a particular notice; Abner Clark, Dean Ashley and Big Jim Adams.

The first named was the acknowledged lover of Dorinda Colby, an honest young farmer, whose love for the rural coquette often led him to neglect his work for the sake of enjoying her society. That enjoyment had been rather mixed of late, and poor Abner at last began to realize the truth of the axiom that true love never did run smooth. The lad was too straightforward to make any attempt to conceal his growing jealousy, and so gave Dorinda an unfair advantage over him. This she was not slow to improve, and for a week past, Abner had undergone the torments of the damned. So it seemed to him.

The two had been engaged for several months past, and Abner had foolishly imagined that his trials and tribulations were all behind him, when he gained the fair one's consent to be his wife at some future time. And all did go smoothly between them until Dean Ashley made his appearance.

The new-comer was handsome enough to turn the brain of a wiser, more sedate girl than Dorinda. Tall, slender, lithe-built and active as a panther, with features of classic regularity and feminine beauty; with skin and complexion as soft and fair as that of an infant, though with a faint, olive tinge that betrayed his creole descent; with silken mustaches and imperial, jetty black, like the hair that fell in soft, glossy curls to his shoulders, with garments that would not have been out of place on Broadway; with jewelry that was no sham; with a mellow voice of remarkable compass and a good command of language—little wonder that Dorinda should be strongly impressed and almost fascinated, despite the fact that her love-vows were already pledged.

Amariah Colby seemed full as much pleased with the dandified fellow, and on more than one occasion, even suffered a little self-inconvenience, rather than interrupt their *tele-a-tete*. This consideration was all the more remarkable when taken in connection with the off-hand, cavalier manner in which Dean Ashley treated the swamp-magnate. The stranger must be a great man, or—"He knows more of 'Riah Colby than 'Riah Colby is willin' he should tell." So hinted Big Jim Adams, who made a comfortable living by killing alligators, skinning and selling their hides to be converted into leather.

With all the impatient anticipation of a child, Dorinda Colby could not content herself with awaiting the coming of a steamboat, inside the house, as propriety would suggest, but had been flitting back and forth from the dwelling to the rude landing-place, vainly looking for some sign of the expected vessel. The blacksmiths and the saw-mill hands were waiting to wish her good-speed, and see her safely embarked.

Poor Abner had vainly maneuvered to draw the girl aside, where they might converse unseen and unheard by others. Those rueful doubts were torturing him afresh, as he saw how Dorinda cleverly avoided falling in with his desire. Nor were they lessened when he caught a glimpse of his audacious rival in apparently earnest discourse with the father of his loved one.

As he turned from the ungrateful sight to Dorinda, he surprised her stolen glance in the same direction, and she, detected, blushed divinely.

"He was a stranger to you one week ago, Dora, and yet he has more influence over you than I, who have known and loved you for years," said Abner, with a sorrowful reproach in his tones. "You would not refuse him a few words in private, yet I have asked you that favor, a dozen times."

It was a rather blundering speech, and Dorinda was not slow in taking advantage of it.

"That may be the very reason, Abner," she said, with a roguish side-glance in the direction of the handsome stranger. "We have known each other so long that you cannot have anything new or interesting to say. It is altogether different with Mr. Ashley. He has traveled so much, and knows so well how to talk about such interesting things that it is a positive pleasure just to listen."

"Yes," interposed Clark, bitterly. "I caught a few words yesterday, by accident. You accused me of being rude to him, afterward, but how could I help it? To know that an impudent upstart like that was talking or making love to the girl who had promised to become my wife! I only wonder that I did not knock him down!"

"Hush! he is coming here," whispered the girl, in a confused flutter, drawing a little aside from her irritated lover.

Whatever he might be, it was plain that Dean Ashley did not lack assurance. Though perfectly understanding the relations between the lovers, he evinced no hesitation in breaking up their *tele-a-tete*, though he was insolently polite in his manner of doing so. His bow to Abner Clark was deep and profound, though there was something in his air that stung the young farmer, as though he had been slapped in the face.

"Very sorry to interrupt you, my friend," he said, easily, in a deep, mellow voice, "but Mr. Colby wishes to speak with his daughter, and requested me to bring her to him." "Allow me, Miss Dora! This way, if you please."

With a cool assurance peculiarly his own, Dean Ashley took the girl's hand and drew it through his arm, still retaining it in his soft, yet firm grasp, then moved slowly toward the house, talking earnestly as they walked.

This was done so coolly yet promptly, that Abner Clark did not think of interfering until too late. Then Dorinda was quietly walking away under care of another escort. His first impulse was to follow and separate them, but he heard a low, meaning laugh come from where Amariah Colby's hired hands were sitting upon a pile of saw-logs. He knew that they were enjoying the impudent manner in which Dean Ashley had "cut him out," and he would not gratify them by a further exhibition of jealousy, just then. Those laughed best who laughed last. With Dorinda fairly started on her journey, the question should be settled between himself and the stranger.

Choking down his anger as best he could, Abner crossed over to where the big alligator-hunter was seated alone, and settled down beside him in the shadow cast by the huge woodpile.

"You'll have to cut his comb, Ab," lazily uttered Adams, blowing a stream of smoke toward the young couple. "But you want to keep one eye open fer his spurs. Sech roosters gen'ally travel full heeled, an' strike sharp at the fust crow. He's a bad man, d'y'e mind."

"Colby sent for her; of course I couldn't object."

Clark strove to speak unconcernedly, but only with poor success, and his face flushed hotly as the alligator-hunter laughed softly.

"Mebbe he did, but the young rooster ain't in no hurry to take the gal to the old man."

Abner's teeth grated and his hands clenched until the finger-nails brought blood from his palms, for he began to believe that he had been made a fool of by Dean Ashley. Well for him if Dorinda was not a party to the deception, too!

For a few moments Dean Ashley had led the maiden toward the house, but then he turned gently aside, and was moving toward the shady woods, talking so earnestly that Dorinda appeared unconscious of their change of course.

"Take it cool, lad," said Adams, warningly, grasping the arm of the young farmer as he sprang to his feet. "I knowed you two must have it out, sooner or later, but don't give him too much the advantage of ye at the start. He's a tough chicken fer a young one, fer all he looks so soft an' gal-like. Go at him with both eyes open, an' you'll come out on top."

The warning was a wise one, and so Abner realized. It served to cool his boiling blood, and instead of rushing headlong into the difficulty that had become inevitable, he acted with a deliberation that boded ill for the dashing stranger.

He knew that Amariah Colby had not left the house since he saw him enter it, and at once hastened there, opening the door and entering without knocking, long acquaintance having rendered such ceremony nugatory.

As long familiarity told him he would, Abner found Amariah Colby reading his Bible. Tall, stoutly built, with a harsh, morose and forbidding cast of countenance, the old man did not look much like the Christian he professed to be, despite the nature of the task he was then engaged upon. And there were not wanting those who openly declared that Amariah Colby only donned his Sunday religion as a convenient cloak to conceal his week-day rascalities. Thus far Abner had been willfully blind and deaf to the floating rumors that, if founded upon fact, would prove the old man to be a rascal in more ways than one. This, because of his ardent love for Dorinda, which naturally inclined him to think the best of all those who were in any degree connected with her. But now he was too thoroughly aroused to pick and choose his words.

"Mr. Colby, did you send for Dora to come to you?" he asked, almost demanded.

The old man looked up in surprise at the strangely quiet tone, and without taking time to think, told the truth. He had not sent for Dorinda, because he had already given her all the instructions and counsel necessary. But the words had hardly crossed the threshold of his lips, than he wished they had remained unuttered. He felt that he had made some kind of a mistake as he saw how the eyes of the young farmer flamed up, and his red lips curled away from his strong, white teeth.

"Then that fellow lied to me. I knew it!"

"Who—who do you mean?" asked Colby, anxiously.

"The prince in disguise whom you and Dora have made so much of, the last few days. Call her over here—call her away from him, or she may see more than may please her."

"You mean to quarrel with him—all for a foolish joke?" but Abner broke in:

"A joke that will end in sore bones for one or both of us. I'll thrash him or he'll thrash me, before the day's an hour older."

"Let it pass, lad—he meant no harm—"

"See here, Mr. Colby. People around here begin to believe that yonder fellow is an outlaw—a horse-thief, counterfeiter, and even worse. They even hint at other names in the same connection. Better go slow; better not be too fast in your defense of him, or they may speak still plainer when they mention your name."

"Do you dare to hint that I am—"

"I hint no hints. I simply tell you to call your daughter aside, or, by the horn of Gabriel I'll thrash the dandified fellow before her very eyes."

Amariah Colby knew that the young farmer meant every word that he said, and for reasons of his own he did not care about crossing his angry mood just then. He knew that a collision between the two men was inevitable now, and stepping to the door, he called aloud to his daughter.

Abner turned a shade paler as he saw how Dorinda started as she heard the call. It showed how wholly absorbed she had been in the conversation, totally forgetting time and direction.

Dean Ashley saw that his little *ruse* had been unmasked, but apparently had no intention of showing the white feather, to carry still further the *simile* started by the big alligator hunter. He turned as though to accompany the girl, but she jerked her hand free and almost ran away from him. Abner averted his face as she passed him by, and strode on to meet Ashley.

The workmen had closely watched these little bits of by-play, confident that there was some congenial amusement in store for them. Now, led by Big Jim Adams, they hastened toward the rival suitors.

Abner stripped off his coat and vest, tossing them aside, together with his hat, rolling up his shirt-

sleeves as he approached Dean Ashley. The latter appeared to fancy any such preparation useless on his part, coolly awaiting the onset of his rival. This seeming self-reliance was very pleasing to all but one of the men drawing near. They felt that they were about to witness a battle royal, and though their sympathies were naturally with Abner, whom they all liked and esteemed, the prospect of an even struggle was very welcome.

That single exception was Big Jim Adams. He had no faith in the stranger. He believed him to be more like a snake in the grass, and keenly watched his every motion, drawing still nearer.

Irritated by the insolent smile that curled the full red lips of his antagonist, Abner Clark called to him to guard himself, and leaping forward, shot out both fists at the mocking visage. But the force of those fierce blows was spent on empty air, Ashley springing swiftly aside, and before Abner could fairly recover himself, the black muzzle of a revolver stared him full in the face. Still smiling, Ashley pulled trigger and the hammer fell; but then a grating, curse hissed through his teeth as an explosion failed to follow. Only for that, Abner Clark would have died almost before he could have realized the deadly peril that threatened. As it was, a second and probably fatal attempt would have been made, only for the prompt action of the old alligator-hunter. Though on the look-out for treachery, he would have been too late to have saved his young friend, but for the failing cap; now he wrested the weapon from Ashley's hand and hurled him heavily to the ground. Lithe and active as a tiger-cat, the young man rebounded to his feet, only to confront the leveled rifle of Jim Adams.

"Up han's, ye slippery skunk!" thundered the alligator-hunter. "Try to tetch a weepin, an' down ye go with daylight shinin' through your brain-pan!"

Angry though he was, Dean Ashley saw that the veteran was not to be trifled with—that he meant every word of his resounding threat.

"A dozen on one—that is your idea of fair play, is it? Shoot, you old fool—shoot! but if you miss, I'll cut your heart out the next moment!"

"It'd sarve you only right ef I should shoot," was the cool response. "You tried to do bloody murder, an' desurve death fer that. But I know a good lickin' would hurt you wuss then sudden death, and a good lickin' you shell have, ef I hev to give it to you my own self!"

"Not until I'm through with him," said Abner, whose narrow escape from death had only served to cool and steady his nerves, instead of intimidating him. "If the coward prefers pistols to fists, all right; I hold myself man enough for him in any and every way."

"Ef thar's any shootin' to be done, I'll do it my own self," positively asserted Adams. "Any critter as 'd take the 'vantage of a man like he tried, ain't wuth the powder it'd take to blow him to never-come-back-ag'in. You shall settle it by a fa'r fist fight, rough an' tumble, an' the one that tries to interfere afore one o' ye hollers 'nough, hes got to dance to my music. The old man is talkin', now, an' what he says he gen'ally backs up. Strip yourself, dandy-cock, or your fine feathers 'll git sp'iled past washin'. You've got a tough colt to curry, an' I greatly mis-doubt whether it lays in your boots to do it."

"What security have I that when you see your favorite getting the worst of it, you will not one or all pile upon me, to save him?" muttered Ashley, with an angry scowl of suspicion.

"The word of a white man; I won't say gentleman, fer I misdoubt you wouldn't know what I meant. You shell hev fa'r play, but fight you must, or take a lickin' on your back like a hog-thief. So make your 'lection," coolly responded Adams, still keeping the young man covered with his short, heavy rifle.

Dean Ashley, when he saw that there was only one course left open to him, showed no further hesitation. Feeling that he had a tough task before him, he removed his outer garments, and submitted to be searched for concealed weapons. Then the rivals confronted each other, with hands in position.

What they lacked in science, they made up in mutual hatred, and for once the spectators were satisfied with the brutal sport. The two men fought like bulldogs. Clark was the heavier and stronger, but this was about balanced by the superior activity of his antagonist. There was no sparring for wind. Each man was too eager to injure the other to think of guarding himself, or of parrying blows. They clenched, and after a fierce wrestle, fell to the ground side by side, struggling like wild beasts.

Here Abner's greater strength came into good play, and he was quickly astride his antagonist, repeatedly dashing his fist into the upturned face, with terrible force. There could be but one ending, now, and ere long Dean Ashley snarled chokingly:

"Enough—curse you, let up! I've got enough!"

CHAPTER III. A STERN CHASE.

THOMAS CRAVEN, master and part owner of the good boat War Eagle, was taking his ease in the railed-off space that was thus separated from the bar with its glittering array of cut glass, plated-ware and spotless mirrors. The trip bade fair to be a profitable one, both in freight and passenger list, and he was in especial good humor this morning. The sable Ganymede in attendance upon the bar, was seldom idle. A dozen tables beyond were occupied by card-players, for, though acknowledged only a second-rater, so far as speed was concerned, the War Eagle was a particular favorite with the gambling fraternity.

Captain Craven was a man wise in his own generation. He welcomed the "card sharps" to his boat, for a consideration. He was paid a regular percentage on their winnings, or charged them treble fare, according to their election. This surplus he pocketed, as his legitimate perquisites, and the regularity with which his bank account swelled, told how advantageous he found the arrangement.

In some cases he was obliged to act as "stool-pigeon" when business on board was dull, and not unfrequently was called upon to defend some black-leg from the retribution they both justly deserved. Nor was he the only captain that thus abused his office, as the records plainly show; nor were professional gamblers his only clients. More than one planter who was generally considered an honorable gentleman, sought Craven's aid and secret influence. Even now, one of that number, who has his

own part to play in this eventful record of wild river-life, was skillfully fleecing three other planters, and the captain was already estimating the amount of percentage he would receive from that little game.

His calculations were interrupted by the far-away sound of a steam whistle, and a few moments later a shrill scream came from the deck above. Captain Craven frowned as he sprang to his feet. Knowing that they were near no regular landing, that the first whistle came from down the river, he had no difficulty in divining the meaning of the sounds; he was too familiar with the etiquette of the river to make any mistake, but he inwardly cursed the promptness of his pilot in accepting the challenge. Under the existing arrangements, a slow trip would pay him better than a fast one.

There were others aboard who understood the meaning conveyed by those two whistles quite as well as he, and scores of excited passengers flocked around him as he emerged from the cabin.

"It's no use, gentlemen," he said, after a keen, steady look down the river at the oncoming steamboat. "That's the Water Witch, and we have double her load of freight aboard. The odds are dead against us!"

An almost menacing outcry arose at this decision. Excitement is like breath in the nostrils of the majority of Americans, nor were the passengers aboard the War Eagle exceptions to the general rule. Jules Beaufort, the planter alluded to as having a secret understanding with the captain, cried aloud with an oath:

"If you show the white feather now, captain, never a pound of freight do you get from my plantation, though you offer to carry it for love."

This struck the key-note, and was only the first of two score similar asseverations. There were no dissenting voices; all were loud in their demands for the captain to make good his pilot's prompt acceptance of the bold challenge, and maintain the reputation of the gallant War Eagle.

He knew what they did not, that even now they were risking their lives over defective and nearly worn-out boilers, but he dare not tell them this. He would have been mobbed ere the words were cold upon his lips. Neither did he dare refuse such a unanimous demand. To forfeit their patronage and freight bills, would be almost equivalent to ruin, and so he yielded to the inevitable and passed the word for the engineers to make steam. He believed he could pursue a middle course, but in this he was mistaken. Those who had been loudest in their demands, for the most part "hot-bloods," young planters who had imbibed the racing instinct with their mother's milk, were far too deeply interested in the matter for that.

They flocked to the boiler deck, and under their eyes, there could be no deception practiced. They knew that wood alone could not generate steam enough to hold their own against the swift Water Witch, and with reckless prodigality they pressed the more inflammable portion of their own freight upon the nowise reluctant firemen.

Hams and sides of bacon; tierces of lard and tallow; heads of turpentine casks were knocked in, and bales of cotton were cut open, rolls of which were dipped into the fluid and cast into the roaring furnaces.

The huge boat quivered with every stroke of the flashing pistons. The side-wheels lashed and pounded the brown waters into foam and spray. As the bluff bows pressed more and more swiftly through the rapid current, a stream of water rose before the prow to the height of a man's head. Volumes of black smoke rolled out from the mighty stacks, while the tall 'scape pipes puffed and panted, laboring like miniature volcanoes. And wild with delight, the excitable planters yelled and shouted themselves hoarse.

By this time all on board the rival steamboats knew that the "stern chase" was fairly begun, and none save those who willfully blinded themselves to the records of the boats, had any doubts as to which one would eventually prove the victor. Yet, as the mighty fabric of wood and iron clove its way faster and still faster through the rushing flood, one by one the more phlegmatic among the passengers caught the spirit of enthusiasm that animated the more excitable of their fellows. Wagers were freely bandied back and forth—not that the War Eagle would win, for the wildest partisan was too sane for that—and bets were made as to the length of time the Water Witch would be in overtaking them.

Amid the uproar and confusion, hearing all, yet plainly more deeply interested in each other, a young couple stood side by side upon the hurricane deck, near the after-guards. That they were lovers, was plain to the eyes of all who might choose to note them. The truth stood revealed in their every word and glance, in their very attitude. Not that they were of the "gushing" order, or made a display of their infatuation, but he was so tenderly polite and thoughtful of her comfort in trifles, while she accepted his attention so gratefully and with such a happy smile that the most inveterate misogynist could hardly have blamed them.

Marie Beaufort was the only daughter—only child and heiress of Jules Beaufort, the gambling planter, who was generally considered one of the wealthiest men of the South. She was as lovely in form and feature as she was in heart. A column of description could not say more.

Percy Talfourd was a fitting mate for her in person and mind—a gentleman born, and a gentleman by nature—tall, athletic, fairly good-looking; young, intelligent and wealthy.

Gradually they grew more interested in the contest, and began to moderately share in the intense excitement which reigned upon board the War Eagle. Like the rest, their sympathies were with the boat whose deck they trod, and they began to grow uncomfortable as they saw that the Water Witch was surely if slowly overtaking them.

The hot-blooded planters were not satisfied to remain long upon the boiler-deck, where they were cut off from all view of the chase, but giving the firemen full permission to use any or all of their freight as fuel, they flocked to the hurricane deck.

But before another half-hour had elapsed, the most obtuse among them became aware that there was something wrong. The Water Witch was coming up with them hand over hand. The War Eagle appeared to be slackening its pace. The huge side-wheels re-

volved more moderately. The heavy clank of the ponderous machinery sung a slower tune, while the timbers no longer trembled and quivered as they had at the commencement.

As before, Jules Beaufort took the lead.

"Craven is throwing off! Down to the boiler-deck, and we'll play firemen ourselves!" he shouted, half crazed with liquor and excitement.

As before, he did not lack for followers, but as he reached the head of the wide flight of steps leading from the cabin-deck below, he was confronted by Captain Craven and his three mates, pistols in hand.

"Stop, gentlemen!" he cried, sternly, barring the way. "I am captain of this boat, and any man that attempts to interfere with its management, does so at his own peril. Stand back! you are cabin passengers, and have no right on the boiler deck while the boat is under way."

"You are slacking the fires and slowing the engines," cried Beaufort, angrily. "You are crawling out of the race, for fear of defeat, like the craven you are named! Give way—we will run the engines ourselves and pay your own price for the privilege."

"And land us all in heaven—or the other place," retorted Craven, with a harsh laugh. "You may count yourselves lucky that you still have a plank under your feet, gentlemen—and that would not be the case in ten minutes from now, if we kept up that racing pressure. We found a flaw in one of the boilers that would have given way under another ounce of steam, and only prompt action averted a disastrous explosion."

"You deserve lynching for pretending to run a sound boat, instead of a rotten tub like this!" growled one of the planters, turning pale.

"The boat passed a thorough inspection, as my papers will show," imperturbably responded the captain. "The boilers are sound enough for any ordinary service, and if I had not weakly allowed you to influence me against my better judgment, you would have been spared this scare. The river is in no fit condition for racing, and—"

Captain Craven did not complete his sentence, for his audience turned and left him in disgust, preferring the card-tables to witnessing the ignominious defeat of the War Eagle.

Percy Talfourd and his fair companion, though less interested in the matter than the planters, had passed around the pilot-house, and leaning over the forward guards, caught enough of the conversation recorded above to understand that the race was given up, but failed to catch the reason given by Captain Craven. With a little laugh at the angry disappointment of the planters, the lovers turned again and sought their former position, watching the rapid approach of the River Queen, but interested far more in their own conversation. This can find no record here. Those who "have been through the mill," can readily imagine it, while those who have not, must wait until their own turn comes!

But for one man at least, the interest of the chase was steadily increasing with every passing moment. He seemed strangely exultant for one who was on the point of losing a five-hundred-dollar bet. Only an accident could save his money now, and yet as the Water Witch steadily drew closer to the other boat, his eyes burned and flashed until the green glasses could no longer disguise them.

With a sudden impulse he pushed aside the glass door at the rear of the pilot, and entered, despite the frown that darkened the brow of that personage.

"Don't mind me," he uttered in the old, husky, disagreeable voice. "I'll keep out of your way. You're bound to win that bet for the captain!"

The pilot did not deem this observation worthy a response, but kept his eyes upon the brown waters, now disturbed by the waves left astern by the War Eagle. But the eccentric passenger had a point to gain, and was not to be bluffed off.

"A master of his profession, as I plainly see you are, sir, could run tolerably close to that boat, eh?"

"Close enough to crush a fly between our wheel-house and hers, without so much as rubbing off an inch of paint," was the prompt response.

"That's a little closer shave than I desire," laughed the passenger, "but I'll give you fifty dollars if you will pass close enough for me to jump on board that boat. Will you do it?"

"Count out your money and get ready to jump," briefly responded the pilot, putting the wheel over.

The Reverend Jabez Hawkins produced the sum offered, and left the pilot-house, buttoning his vest tightly around him, his eyes gleaming more vividly than ever.

Sam Ellis fairly earned his money, running the Water Witch dangerously close to the other boat, and the queer passenger would have easily made the leap, had not his foot slipped a moment too soon as he stood upon the guards. To avoid a fall between the huge wheels, he was forced to leap too soon, and a cry of horror went up as the man hung hovering over almost certain death!

CHAPTER IV.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

THE least trace of hesitation would have been fatal to the man who had paid so liberally for the privilege of risking his life. A moment of indecision, and he must have fallen headlong down into the water between the rushing boats, and either have been drowned or have been sucked under the swiftly pounding wheel that would have broken every bone in his body. But, hesitate he did not. He cast his whole power into the effort, and shot through the air like a black-coated missile hurled from a catapult.

For an instant it seemed as though he would be dashed against the guards just abaft the wheel-house of the War Eagle, but the spell-bound eyewitnesses did not know what the man was capable of accomplishing. While in mid-air, he drew up his knees until they almost touched his chin, and thrust his feet forward, hoping thus to clear the low guards and alight upon the hurricane deck.

Instead, his feet struck upon the broad cap-rail, while the force of his leap enabled him to draw his body up nearly perpendicularly; but there his powers ceased. The terrible strain completely exhausted him. He could do no more. He hung hovering over almost certain death, slowly sinking backward, his great strength and wonderful elasticity of body

only enabling him to delay his fall, not wholly avert it.

Among many others, the lovers had watched the desperate leap, and realizing the danger of the man, Percy Talfourd leaped forward to lend him a helping hand. Prompt as was his action, it would have availed nothing, only for the quick wit and ready hand of the pilot, who threw the wheel over with all possible force and swiftness, giving the bow an abrupt sheer to port, while, as a natural consequence, the stern swung to starboard. This adroit maneuver served to restore the stranger's balance, and gave Talfourd time to grasp him by the hand. One tremendous jerk, and they both went down upon the deck together, amid a chorus of wild, enthusiastic cheers from both boats.

Now that the emergency was past, the crowd upon the War Eagle's hurricane deck, rushed toward the prostrate figures, ready with assistance when none was needed, true to human nature. But they met a sudden check, and while all ceased to advance, a few even retreated as though suddenly brought face to face with the evil one himself.

The Reverend Jabez Hawkins had fallen upon the deck of the War Eagle, but an altogether different appearing man arose in his place. His hat and green goggles lay beside a wig and false beard at his feet, while a quill, wrapped around with cotton, had fallen from one of his nostrils, taking with it that strange look of puffiness from one side of his face.

"Captain Cool Blade, by the eternal!" exclaimed one of the passengers, falling back as he spoke the odd name, as though there was contagion in the air.

The stranger cast one swift, burning glance toward the speaker, then turned to Percy Talfourd. A frank, winning smile played around his lips as he extended his hand, and spoke:

"I owe my life to you, sir, and though it may not be worth much to any person, save myself, my gratitude is none the less deep on that account."

He paused, his pale face flushing deeply, for instead of grasping the proffered hand, the young planter drew back a pace, saying, coldly:

"What I did, was on the impulse of the moment, and deserves no thanks. Perhaps, if I had known—Did that gentleman name you correctly? Are you Captain Cool Blade?"

"And if he did? Bah! what matter? Yes, sir, I am Captain Cool Blade," with a short, hard laugh.

"Then, sir, I consider your offering me your hand, a bitter insult. Had I known who you were, at the time, I would have left you to meet a dog's death."

Those who knew the man best to whom this cutting speech was addressed, held their breath with amazement at the cool temerity of the young planter. But an even greater surprise awaited them in the manner of the insulted. His hotly flushed face turned ashen pale, and his eyes filled with a blue, steely fire, but his voice was low and steady as he replied:

"That cancels the debt. You saved my life, and I have spared yours. The next time we will meet on even footing."

"Takes water, by Moses!" came a voice from the crowd.

Captain Cool Blade turned swiftly, one hand hidden in his bosom, his white teeth visible.

"Will the gentleman please repeat those words? I ask it as a particular favor."

But he asked in vain. He did not look much like a man who would "take water," just then, and the modest speaker wisely concluded not to repeat the obnoxious words; nor was there any response when Captain Cool Blade added:

"I will give any gentleman fifty dollars if he will kindly point out the coward who crowed so loud behind my back. Ah! water seems to be a favorite beverage, just at present."

A low, mocking laugh fell from the man's lips as he surveyed the crowd, with cool insolence in his glance. The terrible reputation he had won in many a deadly struggle along the river stood him in good stead now. Though few of those present could justly be termed cowards, not one of their number was bold or foolhardy enough to confront the speaker.

Percy Talfourd was near enough to overhear the words, but Marie Beaufort was now clinging to his arm, even had he been one who loved a brawl for a brawl's sake, which he was not. He had done and said enough to show his utter detestation of the class of men-sharks at the head of which stood the person known far and wide as Captain Cool Blade. He believed the fellow had committed crimes enough to deserve death, a thousand times over, and if the occasion served, would have felt slight remorse or compunction in shooting him down like a wild beast, but he did not feel called upon to go out of his way to create such an opportunity.

Captain Cool Blade seemed satisfied with the sensation his words and manner had created, and although he knew that the success of the plans he had in view would be endangered by the accident which had disarranged his cunning disguise, he was too thoroughly used to making the best of a bad bargain, to be daunted now. Stooping he picked up the wig, beard, goggles, hat and quill, thrusting the latter up his nostril, and adjusting the other articles in their proper places, once more was the Reverend Jabez Hawkins, shepherd on the look-out for stray sheep.

The Water Witch had slowed her engines for a few moments, for Captain Blunt, believing his strange passenger to be a detective in chase of the defaulting cashier, intended boarding the War Eagle in person. But he was an eye-witness to the foolhardy leap, and the unmasking which followed. He was a bitter and uncompromising enemy to all gamblers, and had once landed this very Captain Cool Blade upon a barren sand-bar in the middle of the Mississippi river, for plying his skill in defiance of the rules and regulations of the boat. He recognized the unmasked face, and knowing how he had been deceived, gave orders to go ahead, consoling himself that he had made five hundred dollars very easily, after all.

A passage was opened through the crowd as though the disguised gambler carried the seeds of the plague in his garments, the moment he made a step forward, and he descended to the cabin deck, entering the office and pausing in front of the desk where stood both the captain and clerk. There was a start of astonishment on the part of the former

official as the ministerial-looking personage addressed him.

"You have reserved my state-room, I presume, Captain Craven, seeing it was paid for in advance, and my baggage sent aboard? I was unexpectedly delayed, and so followed on the Water Witch. Here is my card—you will find it recorded on your books, I think. Am I not right?"

The captain muttered something inarticulate as he glanced at the printed card in his hand. Either the passenger who had so dramatically made his debut on board the War Eagle, understood him, or did not feel inclined to ask a repetition of his words, for he faced around toward a number of planters who had just descended from the hurricane deck, saying:

"Now, gentlemen, as I do not feel at ease in traveling under borrowed plumage, you must allow me to correct the mistake which was made on deck a few moments since. There, nettled by the peculiar manner of some among you, I assumed the name and responsibility of a man whom I am proud to call my friend, and a gentleman who has been much maligned by enemies who dare not repeat their words before his face. I mean Captain Cool Blade."

The speaker smiled as he noted the blank manner in which his denial was received.

"Understand me; I am ready to take the place and responsibility of my friend, if any gentleman present feels himself aggrieved, or holds any grudge against him; but I thought it only right to make this explanation. Captain Craven, here, can vouch for me."

Whether this statement was believed or not, no one asked the captain any questions, and the man in disguise seemed satisfied. Turning to the bar, he politely invited the gentlemen present to imbibe, and as the captain came forward among the first, addressing the stranger as Mr. Hawkins, there was little hesitation among the others.

In ten minutes more, the Reverend Jabez Hawkins had completely removed the evil impression made by his first appearance, and was looked upon as not such a bad-hearted fellow, after all.

"I don't blame you for looking at me a little askant, gentlemen," he said, with a genial laugh, as he settled his false beard in place. "People generally have good reasons for traveling in disguise before they attempt such a masquerade, nor am I an exception to the rule. Only for these handy devices, I would, most likely, at this moment be keeping the fishes company, or be a fit subject for a coroner's inquest, on board the Water Witch."

"As Captain Craven can tell you, I intended to take passage for my plantation on board this boat, but was behind time, delayed in getting together some 'properties' for a projected amateur theatrical entertainment. Losing this boat, I took the Water Witch, and there fell among thieves. I unwittingly mentioned to a friend the fact of my having drawn a heavy amount from the bank, and a party of gamblers picked me up for a proper subject to fleece."

"I was always fond of cards—and that passion, added, perhaps to an unlucky habit of crooking my elbow rather oftener than my spiritual superiors deemed advisable—gave me a speedy discharge from my pastoral situation. I make this confession that no scandal may be cast upon the church by my story."

"I took the wolves for simple sheep, like myself, and consented to take a hand in a friendly game. For a time, all went merry as a marriage bell, but then—we were playing draw poker—as we began to play for higher stakes, I noticed that when I had good hands, I had to do all the betting. This, occurring so often, led to me look a little beneath the surface, and I soon discovered that we were playing with marked cards. Like the majority of men who handle the pasteboards occasionally, I may be a little inclined to over-rate my skill, but I believed that I could fight five without scorching my fingers, and I did, thanks to the lessons given me at odd times by my particular friend, Captain Cool Blade."

"Luckily the cards we played with were the common 'steamboat cards,' with stars on the backs, so, when it came my turn to deal, I rung in a cold deck on them, of my own. These were marked, but after a different plan, and I took care to let them see the backs of my hand plainly. Of course they didn't take the trouble to look at the backs of their own, while they could see the faces."

"I held four aces, and discarded the seven of spades, which was marked the same as the ace of clubs was in the other deck. I gave them four kings, queens and knaves, respectively, and as they believed I had thrown out an ace, they felt sure I was drawing to fill a flush, nor did the grin I donned as I raised my hand, tend to tell them any better."

"With one ace on the board—and we were not playing straight flushes—they knew that any one of their hands would beat mine, and as I saw and raised their bets, they went in for a clean sweep. They got it, but not exactly as they had fancied. When all was up, they called, and I showed them four aces. Then there was music in the air, sure enough!"

"As I drew down the pot, they claimed foul play, and faced the discards to show the ace of clubs—but it wasn't there. The crowd knew them for professional gamblers, and sustained my claims. They could not deny having furnished the cards, though the markings had been so strangely changed. We were playing 'freeze-out,' and as they had no money left, they could not require me to play any longer. So I pocketed over twenty thousand dollars in notes, and the biters were bit."

"But a friend soon warned me that my life and money were in danger, and slipping into my state-room, I donned this disguise. Just then we came in sight of this boat, and I bet the captain five hundred dollars that he couldn't overtake you. I lost—but I want myself the winner, after all."

At this juncture, the game in the gentlemen's cabin beyond came to an end, and Jules Beaufort, flushed with wine and victory, entered the bar, followed by his more sober and serious companions.

A truly startling change came over Hawkins as his gaze rested upon the face of the excited planter, but his strong agitation was unnoticed. All attention was absorbed by Beaufort, who boasted of his successful skill with the wonderful vivacity of a half-drunken creole.

"Only for the name of the thing, I'd turn professional gambler," he declared, with a shrill laugh. "Twenty thousand dollars have I cleared since the

sun rose! I could play for the world, to-day, and never fear losing. Yet, the money burns in my pockets, and I hold it a free gift for the man who is bold enough to play me for it. Gentlemen, I challenge you, one and all—"

"You need seek no further—I am ready to play you, at any and every game you may name."

The acceptor of the bold challenge was the Reverend Hawkins.

CHAPTER V.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

THE half-drunken planter turned quickly at the sound of these words, for the first time noticing the Reverend Jabez Hawkins. His first impression was not a very favorable one, and his thin lips curled scornfully as he made reply:

"My remark was not addressed to you, sir. I never play cards for money with strangers."

"Indeed! then you should have qualified your sweeping challenge, and barred strangers and sober men. No one would dispute your wisdom. Such men have an inconvenient habit of watching the game, with a due appreciation of any fine points—"

"Do you dare to insinuate—"

"I am simply stating a fact, my good sir," coolly interposed the man in disguise. "If it cuts unpleasantly near the quick, blame the fact, not me. But this is wandering from the question. You issued a challenge; I accepted it. I will play you any game of cards you may name, for any stake you please, from a picayune to a life. If you are afraid to play me, say so at once, and that will end the matter. But, in that case, let me give you a word of advice. Crow a little more modestly, next time, or some other man may mistake your idle boasting for a genuine defiance."

"I have the spurs to back up my crowing, if necessary," retorted the planter, and those who knew him best, saw his face assume what past experience had told them was his dangerous expression, a cold, icy smile. "But a gentleman of honor does not care to imperil his reputation by playing with every stranger whom he may chance to encounter. There are such things known along this river as men-sharks—"

"I pulled the teeth of three of them this morning," quietly interposed the stranger, "and have no objections to make the number even."

"Who the devil are you, anyhow?"

"Captain Craven, will you be so kind as to enlighten this gentleman?"

"Mr. Jones," said the captain, in the hurried tone of one who was anxious to preserve peace between two friends, "allow me to introduce you to my friend, the Reverend Jabez Hawkins, once a Baptist minister, but now a wealthy and honored planter of North-western Louisiana."

"That is all-sufficient—and, my dear sir," cried the planter, extending his hand, "I freely apologize for my suspicions. Not that you can blame me so much, since I saw at the first glance that you were *en masquerade*, and there are so many disreputable characters afloat, now, that you can hardly wonder at my suspicions."

"Say no more, Mr. Jones. Perhaps we were both a little too hasty. As for the disguise I wear, it was the means of saving my life and some forty thousand dollars to-day. Remembering this, I would be ungrateful to cast it aside now. Besides, I believe I would throw away my luck with it. After our little game is ended, will be time enough to unmask."

As nearly every gambler is more or less superstitious, this explanation answered quite as well as a more plausible one.

"My luck lies in my fingers and my brains," said Beaufort, who chose to travel under the more plebeian name of Jones. "We will see which is the most influential. But first—let us drink to our better acquaintance, Mr. Hawkins. Gentlemen, you will please join us?"

There were no refusals. All present were interested in the match of skill that had been so queerly brought about. Beaufort was known as one of the most skillful poker-players in the South, while wonderful tales had been told of Captain Cool Blade, whom this ex-preacher so strongly resembled. A contest between those two champions would be a battle royal, indeed. Nor was this all. Some of the closer observers believed that there was something more below the surface than had been shadowed forth by the interchange of compliments, sharp as that had been. They believed they scented sport ahead, even more interesting than a heavy game of "draw."

In some manner Percy Talfourd gained an inkling of what was going on below, and descended from the hurricane-deck, sending Marie Beaufort in to her mother, who was resting upon a couch in the ladies' cabin, while he at once sought out the planter in order to warn him against playing with the disguised passenger. Unluckily for his purpose, the more Beaufort drank, the greater became his obstinacy, which strongly resembled that of a pig, sure to take him in the direction opposite to the one in which he should go.

"I am fully capable of judging for myself, Mr. Talfourd," he said, icily, turning aside impatiently. "But as a gentleman you can not play with that fellow," urged the young man. "He admitted to me that his name was Captain Cool Blade—"

"My dear sir," interposed the harsh, husky voice of the Reverend Jabez Hawkins, "I have already explained my assumption of that name and title. Captain Craven can tell you who and what I am; if his report fails to satisfy you, have patience for a brief time, and as soon as I have settled my little match with my friend, Mr. Jones, I will cheerfully put you out of your misery."

"Let the matter drop, Talfourd," sharply uttered the planter. "It is no business of yours, anyway, and were he the old boy himself, I would play him, now."

Talfourd saw that he could do nothing under the present circumstances, and was wise enough to know that any further remonstrances would only serve to make a bad matter worse. But, though he lapsed into silence, he resolved to keep his eyes open and watch every movement of the man whom he so strongly suspected.

"The quicker we get to work, the sooner we will find out who is king of the pasteboards," laughed Beaufort, a little nervously, setting down his glass

and turning away from the bar. "Come, Brother Hawkins, the money I have won this morning is already burning a hole in my pocket."

"I'll lure it away before it has time to scorch your skin, never fear," retorted the other, with a disagreeable smile. "Captain, please favor us with some fresh cards—not marked ones, for this is to be a pure trial of skill, rather than for money alone. Am I not right, Mr. Jones?"

"I am a gentleman, sir, and know nothing about marked cards," a little stiffly responded the planter to this question.

"Yet these cards are all marked," and the ex-minister carelessly spread out the cards which had been abandoned by Beaufort and his losing companions. "Luckily you were all gentlemen, or there might be some dispute about that money. Ah, captain, many thanks—charge them to me, if you please," he added blandly, as the captain came up with a half-dozen decks of new cards.

Despite his assertion that he was wholly ignorant of marked cards, Beaufort closely inspected one of the packs before seating himself.

"One word before we begin," said Hawkins. "It may, possibly, save a dispute before the end. Shall we play 'straights'? If so, what value shall they have?"

"Beat two pair—and a 'royal flush' rakes the board," promptly responded Beaufort.

"Very well; it is best to fully understand these little disputed points beforehand. Yet a man is quite as apt to be struck by lightning as he is to hold a sequence flush, though it *has* been done."

To the uninitiated, it may not be amiss to state that a "royal flush" is composed of five cards of one suit, running in consecutive order, as ace to four spot, both inclusive, or ace, king, queen, knave and ten. When this hand is played in the game of draw-poker, it ranks all others, beating four aces. However, it is never played save by special agreement.

"How much *ante*?" asked Beaufort, shuffling the cards. "Don't put it too low. I dislike playing light at any time, and more especially when my luck is in the ascendancy, as it is to-day."

"Fifty dollars *ante*, and as much to come in; or will that be too high for you?"

"Not if it were a thousand—but that will do to commence upon. No limit in betting, though!"

"Your pile will hardly last until dinner time, at that rate," laughed Hawkins, winning the deal and putting up his *ante*, which Beaufort, a little nettled, immediately covered with a note for the same amount, by way of a "blind."

This bold opening pleased all of the crowd gathered around, with the exception of Percy Talfourd. His suspicions were, if anything, strengthened by the manner and words of Hawkins, and he knew that Beaufort was not then in a fit condition for the contest of skill which he had invited.

There was nothing he could do but watch, unless his vigilance could detect some foul play on the part of the planter's antagonist. Although he was the affianced lover of Beaufort's only child, he was no favorite with the father. He did not drink or gamble, and had more than once respectfully endeavored to wean Beaufort from those fascinating evils. The only thing he accomplished was winning the ill-will of the irritable planter, who even went so far as to try to break the engagement between the young couple, but vainly. Under these circumstances, Talfourd knew that any further interference on his part would be productive of more harm than good, unless he could show better cause than suspicions alone.

However interesting a game of cards, where high stakes are depending upon the result, may be to the spectators, particularly if the gamblers are both bold and skillful, a bald record of the various changes and fluctuations makes but dull reading in print.

For a time fortune seemed undecided, now favoring one, now another, the only material result being that Beaufort grew intensely interested, and wagered heavier sums on lighter hands than at first.

Then the fickle dame appeared to desert the planter and settle upon the ex-minister, who won hand after hand with a truly remarkable regularity, when the former fluctuations were remembered. It was just as though Hawkins had thus far been amusing himself with the planter, and now went in to clean him out in sober earnest. But watch as closely as he might, Talfourd could detect nothing that even suggested foul play in the actions of the winner. To all appearance everything was fair and above board.

Jules Beaufort grew hot and flushed as stake after stake was swept across the table, and just when he most needed his cool and steady nerve, it deserted him. He tried "bluffing" on a poor hand, but his changing features betrayed him, and Hawkins won a heavy stake with one small pair that, ordinarily, not a dollar would have been risked upon. He himself, though plainly very deeply interested in the play, was cool as a frosty morning, and his face was utterly expressionless; a sphinx was not more difficult to read.

Thus the game ran on for an hour or more, by which time Jules Beaufort had lost the larger moiety of his morning's winnings. It was the turn of the Reverend Jabez Hawkins to deal. The cards passed slowly one by one through his long fingers, until each had five before him. There was a sudden closing of Beaufort's lips, and a quick light in his eyes that told the close observer he held a good hand. His fingers trembled a little, as he covered the dealer's *ante*, and discarded two cards. Hawkins quickly ran over his hand, then repeated the action, as though doubtful what course to pursue, but finally threw out a single card. He dealt two cards to Beaufort, then served one to himself, glancing keenly at the planter beneath his eyebrows before again lifting his own cards.

Slowly the color faded out of the planter's red face, and his fingers trembled so that they made a rustling sound among the crisp bank notes as he selected a few bills, saying as he placed them on the stakes:

"Five hundred dollars, for luck!"

Hawkins slowly ran over his cards, as though mentally debating with himself whether they were worth meeting such a bold stake. Evidently he concluded that they were, for one by one he laid out bills to the amount, and dropped them upon the pile. Then he glanced once more at his hand, while Beaufort trembled in every nerve as he feared and expected

to hear a "call." But such was not the case. Hawkins "raised" him a thousand.

Beaufort with a shrill laugh, cried:

"I glory in your spunk, partner, but you could make a better use of the money. Better draw it down; I give you permission to do so."

"Thanks," was the cool response, "but I can afford to lose the sum, if my hand isn't as good as I think it. I've seen men try the bluff game before now."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," retorted Beaufort, with a repetition of his nervous laugh. "If you know bluff so well when you see it, I'll give you a trifle more of it. I see your thousand, and go you five thousand better!"

The Reverend Jabez Hawkins seemed the only cool and unexcited person at or around the table, as Jules Beaufort counted out the sum he had named. Not a little to the surprise of those around, he no sooner saw the amount staked than he proceeded to cover it, then saying:

"I am not going to call you, just yet, Mr. Jones, but, in order to save breath and time, please tell me the exact amount of money you have with you, only saving out a sum for traveling expenses. There are twenty-five thousand dollars in this wallet. I cover your five, and go twenty thousand better, unless that is oversizing your pile. If so, I'll give you a sight for your money."

His hands trembling more than ever, the planter covered the amount, then gasped:

"I call you—what have you got?" at the same time throwing down his hand containing *four aces*."

"A royal flush!" said Hawkins, with a taunting laugh, showing his hand; all hearts, running from six to ten, both inclusive.

For a few moments Beaufort stared as though turned to a statue of ice, but as Hawkins swept the large sum toward him, he sprang to his feet, crying:

"Foul play! Two such hands never came together fairly! You have cheated me!"

Swift as a bolt of lightning, the planter was knocked heels over head by the fist of the Reverend Jabez Hawkins!

CHAPTER VI.

"CAPTAIN COOL BLADE."

INSTANTLY all was confusion the most profound. The crowd of spectators fairly tumbled over each other in their haste to get out of the way of the bullets which experience told them would almost certainly follow swift upon the heels of that knock-down argument. Of them all, only one man strove to reach the table, rather than flee from it, but despite his most strenuous efforts, Percy Talfourd was swept away by that headlong rush of excited humanity. But he was a man who did not hesitate to use heroic measures when nothing milder would suffice, and squaring himself as well as he was able, he struck out straight from the shoulder, repeatedly and in swift succession, each stroke dropping a man in a style that would have brought tears of exquisite delight to the eyes of his old boxing-master, Frank Ambrose, *alias* "Yankee Sullivan."

This Emerald-Islander-like mode of reasoning did not tend to lessen the confusion. Those who fell beneath the stout blows of the young planter, no longer thought of bullets from the rear, but as soon as they could recover their footing, struck out manfully for satisfaction, not pausing to inquire whose heavy fist had felled them, but apparently willing to pay Peter what was owing to Paul. However, Percy Talfourd gained his object.

After delivering that swift, sure blow that cut short the excited charge of foul play, knocking Jules Beaufort end over end across the cabin floor, the Reverend Jabez Hawkins swiftly gathered up the pile of bank-notes that lay upon the table, and crammed them into his breast pockets. But only one hand was thus occupied. The other held a revolver cocked and ready for use in case of need.

Heavy and unexpected though the blow had been, Jules Beaufort had scarcely ceased rolling over ere he was upon his feet again. One hand brushed the blood from his eyes, while the other was thrust down the back of his neck, plucking from thence a long, broad-bladed "tooth-pick." A fierce, grating curse hissed from between his closely clenched teeth as he crouched down for a panther-like leap upon his adversary, who appeared nothing loth, though he cried aloud as he raised his pistol:

"Take one step forward, Jacques Bouchier, and, by the horn of Gabriel! I'll scatter your brains to the four winds!"

The man of many names did not heed if he heard this warning cry, and had the antagonists been left to themselves, at least one dead man would have cumbered the floor ere another breath could have been drawn; but the end was not to come then nor thus.

Percy Talfourd, freed from the crowd by his sturdy blows, leaped to the side of his prospective father-in-law, wrested the glittering weapon from his hand, and holding him helpless as a child with one strong arm, drew a revolver and confronted the Reverend Jabez Hawkins, sternly crying:

"Put up your weapon, sir! Refuse, and I'll shoot you down with as little mercy as I would show to a mad-dog that crossed my path!"

A mocking laugh parted the disguised man's lips! "You crow loud for a youngster, but, so be it! My quarrel is not with you. I am content to wait. I answered a foul lie with an honest blow. If the noble and gentlemanly planter can swallow that, together with his losses, I have no cause to complain."

"Hands off, Talfourd!" snarled Beaufort, by a desperate effort almost wresting himself free from the firm grasp of the young planter. "Curse you, hands off! I'm not a child to be treated thus! Let up, I say!"

"Not until you are cooler than you are now," was the firm response. "You are half-mad, and no fitting match for yonder scoundrel—"

"Choose your words with a little more judgment, young man," sharply interrupted the man stigmatized with this epithet. "I can make large allowance for you, since I owe you my life, but there is reason in all things. Even *you* can go too far and say too much."

"What I say, I am ready to back up—provided you can show yourself a man whom a gentleman can have dealings with."

"Not until I have had satisfaction—not until he

has answered to me for that cowardly blow!" cried Beaufort, almost frothing at the mouth, so intense was his rage and excitement.

"I'll not balk you there—never fear!" quickly uttered the successful gamester. "Name your time and place; the sooner the better, say I!"

"Not here—let the matter rest until we reach a landing," interposed Captain Craven, only to be thrust back by the strong hand of the gambler.

"Keep your fingers out of the pie, friend, unless you want to get them burnt. This matter has passed beyond your control. Unless yonder gentleman makes me an abject apology, and swallows the words he uttered a minute since, he shall give me satisfaction, though I have to lend him the necessary pluck with a cowhide!"

If the object of the speaker was to still further enrage the planter, then he was fully gratified. Howling and cursing like a veritable madman, Jules Beaufort struggled so furiously to free himself from that restraining grasp, that Talfourd was obliged to drop his weapon and make stout use of both arms.

"Brown—Kingsley, lend me a hand here," panted the young planter, calling upon two of his brother planters. "Some one open the door of a state-room. Can't you see that the man is mad with excitement and liquor?"

His words were promptly obeyed, and Jules Beaufort was forced into one of the adjacent state-rooms, and the door closed behind him and his guardian.

"A genuine case of 'two of you hold him, one can hold me!'" uttered the gambler, with a disagreeable laugh, as he coolly ran his eyes around over the still excited crowd. "Pity that the poor old boy is permitted to run around loose, if he is not to be held accountable for his words or actions."

"Guard your tongue, old man," muttered Captain Craven, in a low tone as he drew near the angry gambler and picked up the cards from off the table.

"There's a strong feeling against you already, and the sooner you leave this boat, the healthier it will be for you. Slip out of the way, and watch your chance; I'll give the signal for the pilot to edge in to shore."

"What do you take me for, anyhow? I've done nothing to be ashamed of. I won that foolish braggart's money on the square, and now you advise me to sneak away like a thief in the night. You may mean well enough, Captain Craven, but you give very unpalatable advice for an honest man to swallow."

The captain fell back, covered with confusion, for the gambler had spoken loudly, so that all around could hear his words. Craven knew that the cards in his pocket were marked, on a plan known only to the gambler and himself, and he knew just as well that Jules Beaufort had been systematically fleeced by foul playing. Knowing this, but ignorant of the reasons the gambler had for acting as he did, he naturally supposed the man in disguise would be glad of a chance of getting away with his plunder without any further trouble.

The planters around began to suspect something of the truth, and gave vent to their feelings in mutterings that gradually became outspoken words, culminating in a demand that the cards played with should be submitted to them for a close inspection.

"Measure your words, gentlemen!" cried the gambler as he caught the meaning underlying this growing demand. "I am playing a 'lone hand' here, but you will find that I am sufficiently numerous to answer to each and every man who hints anything against the fairness of my game," and as he spoke he tore the wig, false beard and goggles from their positions and flung them upon the table.

"Captain Cool Blade—or else the devil!" cried one of the planters in the rear.

"Captain Cool Blade, and wholly at your service, gentlemen, after I have settled our little dispute over the cards. Some among you have indirectly hinted at foul play on my part, by asking that the cards we used be handed over for inspection, and in doing so, you have insulted *me*. The moment my hands are at liberty, I will call you to account; and, by the horn of Gabriel! you shall prove your hints or eat them! To save time, you can draw lots, to decide which comes first, for I mean pure business!"

It was a strange sight, though one readily accounted for; a single man braving full two score, uttering his bitter defiance with a mocking politeness that cut like the stroke of a rawhide. But the man was one among ten thousand. Utterly devoid of personal fear, a fire-eater almost from his cradle up, master of all weapons, with nerves like steel and the muscles of a gladiator, his utter disregard of life served him better than a coat of strongest mail.

Percy Talfourd, emerging from the state-room in which he had left Jules Beaufort under care of the two planters, overheard this defiance, and despite his abhorrence of the evil class represented by the speaker, his tone was more respectful than he intended it should be, as he spoke:

"Sir, you seem very touchy on the point of honor. Doubtless you are right in so carefully guarding the slight remnant; you know best. I am here on the part of Mr. Jones—"

"He means business, then?" eagerly interposed the man who called himself Captain Cool Blade.

"When, where and how? time, place and weapons?"

"You misunderstand me," was the cool response. "The gentleman is in no fit condition to fight a duel now, but I am ready to take his place. I repeat his charge of foul play—I believe you a wolf in sheep's clothing—a common swindler, if that suits you better, and if nothing but blood-letting will suit your taste, I am willing to act as a surgeon, now and here!"

Captain Cool Blade laughed softly.

"Mr Jones should be proud of his many friends who are so eager to take his responsibilities upon their own shoulders. But age before beauty, my dear sir. After I am through with Mr. Jones, I shall be only too happy to teach *you* a lesson."

"Mr Jones will have nothing more to do with you." "Did he send that message to me? Is he a coward, then?" sharply demanded Captain Cool Blade, his eyes aglow with a venomous fire. "Bring him out from his hiding-place, and let him make an apology, then, or, by the bones of Abraham! I'll write the title upon his back with a dog-whip!"

Before Talfourd could reply to this hot speech, the sounds of a confused struggle came from the state-room, and then the door was forcibly flung

open. Jules Beaufort rushed forth, and as his gaze fell upon Captain Cool Blade, he choked down his rage by a violent exertion of will, saying:

"I overheard your words. I will fight you, sir." "Across a handkerchief, if you choose," laughed the gambler.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

THE bitter emphasis with which Captain Cool Blade uttered these words, caused more than one of those who heard them believe that this quarrel was rather the continuation of an old and deadly feud, than a simple outgrowth of the dispute over the card-table. But, however that might be, it was clear to all that bloodshed must follow, and with breathless interest they watched the progress of the affair, loth to lose a single point.

Though Jules Beaufort was anything but a general favorite among those who knew him best, for he was quarrelsome in his cups, and a good deal of a bully, presuming not a little upon the fact of his having been "out" some half-score times, he certainly bore the good-wishes of the majority on this occasion. They were disagreeably conscious of having offended the doughty Captain Cool Blade, and if the sanguinary stories told of the man-shark were true, he would hardly be satisfied with perforating or carving up one mortal, but might call upon them to take their turns, as indeed he had threatened.

It is no less strange than true that a single man should be able to thus rule it over a multitude, each one of whom, perhaps, was quite that man's equal in everything save reckless disregard of life. It is the *reputation*, not the man alone. A notable instance was that where the notorious pugilist, Yankee Sullivan, became engaged in a fight with a stranger, who was clearly getting the better of the professional bruiser, when a friend asked him if he knew whom he was fighting. As he heard the name of his noted adversary, the man seemed quite unnerved, and coming up again, Yankee Sullivan won the victory in that same round, thanks to his terrible reputation, that was then in everybody's mouth.

It was fear, then, rather than friendship that influenced the popular sentiment. The planters hoped rather than believed that their representative would come through the impending duel with flying colors.

Percy Talfourd vainly endeavored to induce Jules Beaufort to retract his determination to fight the gambler. Though the wine-heated planter grew a little quieter when he understood who his adversary really was, he was still resolved to encounter him. The bitter taunts of the adventurer, following so closely upon the heavy losses he had sustained at the card-table, rendered him desperate.

Though somewhat of a bully, and addicted to boasting, there was no coward's blood in his veins.

Even Talfourd saw at length that matters had gone too far to be settled otherwise than by an appeal to "the code," and was reluctantly obliged to yield.

The instant this result was conceded, all parties concerned grew almost painfully polite. Talfourd approached Captain Cool Blade, with a dignified bow.

"I have the honor to represent Mr. Jones in this affair; perhaps you will favor me with the name of your friend and second?"

The doughty captain appeared at a loss for a moment, as his dark eyes roved swiftly around the crowded cabin. A man with such a reputation as his, has few friends upon whom he could rely in such an emergency as the present. There were many around him whom he knew well by sight and reputation, but they were far more likely to be the friends of Jules Beaufort than his. He could scarcely select one of the planters, since the majority of them hated and feared him as the Evil One is said to dread and detest holy water. There was only one other whom he felt he could trust, and to him he spoke:

"Perhaps you will favor me, Captain Craven?"

"No, sir, I will not," was the short and sullen response. "It would be utter ruin to me, and you know it. I'll have nothing more to do with the disgraceful affair."

"A friend in need is a friend indeed!" uttered Captain Cool Blade, with a short, bitter laugh. "I must throw myself on your mercy, sir, I'm afraid. Perhaps you will be kind enough to act for us both. I have implicit confidence in your honor—"

"You must excuse me, sir," coldly interposed the young planter. "I prefer not having any more intimate dealings with you than I can possibly help. If you desire a reason, I have one ready. If you live through this duel, I mean to fight you myself."

"You do me much honor!" with an ironical bow of exaggerated politeness. "Well, I don't see but what I shall have to hire one of the negro waiters to act for me, since you insist on proceeding in accordance with the code."

"That would hardly suit the dainty bloods, captain," uttered a clear, woman-like voice, and a slender, neatly-dressed form pressed its way through the eagerly listening crowd. "I would rather you had a friend of more experience, but if you will accept of my services, I'll do the best I know how."

In age and figure the speaker seemed but a boy, though there was something indefinable in his baby-like features and big blue eyes that told he was by no means a novice in wild life.

"I will, and gladly," cordially uttered the gambler, as he extended his hand, then turning toward Percy Talfourd: "Excuse us one moment, while I give my friend and second his instructions."

Talfourd bowed slightly and turned to the state room into which Jules Beaufort had retired as soon as he became convinced that he was not to be cheated out of the satisfaction he demanded.

"Is it all settled? how and when?" he cried, eagerly, as the young planter entered.

"The matter shall be arranged to your satisfaction, never fear. The fellow is now consulting with his second. Now you must be guided by my advice, since I am to act for you. You know the reputation that fellow has earned as a fire-eater—"

"I know—and I'll make him eat his last dose of fire before another hour passes by!"

"I hope and believe you will; but that is no reason why you should throw away any chances. It would be an eternal disgrace for a gentleman to suffer a ruffianly brute like that to pink him. You must strip to the waist, and take a cold bath. That will

steady your nerves, and counteract the wine you have drunk so freely. Come, to work!"

Leaving Beaufort to follow the wise advice of his young but experienced second, we will take a glance at his adversary, who, with his volunteer second, withdrew into a state-room nearly opposite.

"I've seen you before—but where?" were the first words of Captain Cool Blade, as he locked the door.

"At the Metairie race course, last spring."

"I remember, now; then you are Steel Spring?"

"My name is Arthur Spring, but men sometimes call me by that nickname," laughed the youth, who certainly looked little like the desperado he really was, his hand stained with the heart's blood of nearly a half-score men. "But to business. Unless I am greatly mistaken, you mean to kill that planter."

"I do, most assuredly," was the quiet but resolute response. "All you need to do is to see that I have a fair chance, pistol or bowie-knife. Coincidence with any proposal they may make that will give me that show. I'll attend to the rest."

After a few more words Captain Cool Blade opened the door, and they both emerged. Talfourd was awaiting them, having intrusted the case of Beaufort to some of his friends, who were superintending the cold-water-cure. Spring immediately passed over to him, while his principal sauntered leisurely toward the bar.

Arthur Spring did not cut any time to waste.

"I am ready to hear whatever you may have to suggest, Mr. Talfourd," he said, politely, after having presented his card to the young planter. "As there may be some doubt as to which of the gentlemen is the challenger, and which the challenged, I am instructed by my principal to say that he is ready to accept any weapon or weapons that your friend may prefer."

"He is very considerate," returned Talfourd, with a slight sneer. "The weapons will be revolvers, each man to be armed with a single pistol. The place on the hurricane-deck, the parties to stand back to back in the center, advance each twenty paces and halt for the word to turn. At that word they may turn, advance and fire at will. The one who turns or fires before the agreed upon word is given, will be shot down in his tracks."

"Admirably put, and perfectly satisfactory to my side. It is understood, of course, that there shall be no outside interference until all the chambers of both weapons are emptied, or one or both of the principals are killed?"

Talfourd nodded coldly. The cool, almost flippant manner in which Spring treated the serious affair, nettled him not a little.

"And the time? you have omitted that important particular," added Steel Spring.

"In ten minutes from now. I believe there is nothing more to discuss? Then I bid you good-day."

Steel Spring nodded carelessly and hastened to report to his principal, who was leaning against the bar, glass in hand. He listened intently to the arrangements that had been made, and nodded his approval, then raised the glass, saying:

"A short and speedy journey to the worthy Mr. Jones, and may his reception be so warm that he will never miss his overcoat!"

Utter silence followed this sneering toast, and even the captain looked graver than ever as he turned aside. Captain Cool Blade laughed recklessly, and as he saw his antagonist preparing to go on deck, he turned away from the bar.

Much time has been consumed in relating the various preliminaries, but the duel itself was over almost ere it began. Everything had been arranged so well that there were no hitches or delays. The principals were warned as to the conditions, and then put in position, waiting for the word, pistol in hand.

All approaches to the hurricane-deck were guarded, lest some of the lady passengers should attempt to go up. The spectators were standing upon the railing of the cabin-deck, their heads just above the upper guards, in readiness to dodge a bullet, if need be. A dozen men were upon the hurricane-deck, to see fair play.

The word was given, and the two duelists strode away from each other, their feet keeping time as Percy Talfourd counted one by one up to twenty. Then there was a breathless pause, followed by the signal.

Both men turned at the same instant and advanced, but their demeanor was widely different. Beaufort was strongly excited, and began firing while they were still thirty paces apart. Not so Captain Cool Blade. Outwardly as calm as though he bore a charmed life, he strode steadily on, his pistol hand hanging free.

A bullet cut through his shirt-collar, fairly razing the skin, but he never flinched an inch.

Beaufort stopped short and raising his left arm, leveled his pistol over it, taking a deliberate aim at his cool antagonist. Captain Cool Blade suddenly crouched low down and then leaped forward like a panther, the bullet of his foe whistling harmlessly over his head.

As he straightened up, his revolver rose and was discharged twice in swift succession.

Jules Beaufort reeled and fell, his pistol exploding as it struck the deck, one of the spectators falling with a sharp scream of agony as the bullet struck him.

Captain Cool Blade sprang to the side of Beaufort, and cried:

"Remember Henry Peyton, Jacques Bouchier!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MARONED.

As these words were hissed into his ears, the fallen planter opened his eyes, into which came a look of utterable horror as he at last recognized the man whose hand had laid him low. A faint, quivering cry parted his lips, and as his head fell back once more, he closed his lids tightly as though to shut out some terrible, loathsome sight.

Captain Cool Blade had only time to utter the few words recorded, and to note that his aim had not failed him. As the planter lay upon his back, the successful duelist could see that his bullets had struck just over the heart of his antagonist, and within a single inch of each other. Blood was rapidly staining the garments around the twin perforations, and trickling down to form a little pool at the feet of the gambler.

All this in a breath, as it were. It took a few mo-

men's for the onlookers to fully realize what had occurred, for the unexpected fall of one of their own number had thrown them into confusion. But then, with loud, excited cries, they pressed forward, closing in upon the gambler.

Whether they meant him harm, just then, can only be surmised, but Captain Cool Blade believed they did, and he was not a man to yield so tamely, or be taken at a disadvantage under even less favorable circumstances.

With two swift, backward leaps, he brought them all before him, standing at bay with his revolver cocked and half poised, his eyes aglow, his lips curled back from his white, firm-set teeth.

Despite his plain, close-fitting black garb, he looked every inch a man as he stood defiantly confronting the three score men who had flocked upon the hurricane-deck the moment they believed the danger was past.

The foremost recoiled a little as they observed his defiant attitude, and Captain Cool Blade was not slow to improve his advantage. In a clear, ringing voice he called aloud:

"You saw that he had more than fair play, gentlemen. He fired four shots before I pulled trigger at all. It was a fair, stand-up fight, and I won. Now I am going down below, peaceably if I can, but if any person attempts to bar my path I shall clear it as best I may. And when I shoot, I shoot to kill!"

With a firm and deliberate step he crossed the deck, the crowd falling back on either side and giving him a free and unobstructed passage. He reached the port ladder and only pausing to salute the company with an ironical bow, he disappeared from their view.

Percy Talfourd was busied with the fallen planter, else the gambler might not have escaped so easily.

Jules Beaufort lay like one already dead, only for the faint, almost imperceptible breath that came from his lungs at regular intervals. Talfourd opened his coat and vest, then cut away his linen and undershirt from around the double wound. His heart sunk heavily as he brushed away the clots of coagulating blood. The bullets had entered just below the left nipple, and could hardly have escaped piercing the heart. It was little less than a miracle that Jules Beaufort still drew the breath of life.

Others were gathered around the young man who had fallen a victim to Jules Beaufort's last shot. The ball had struck and shattered his left knee-cap in a frightful manner. Even if the limb could be saved, which was doubtful, he would be a cripple for life.

There was only one medical man on board the boat, and he was still in his berth, sleeping off a heavy debauch. It was a poor chance, but better than none, and Percy Talfourd, leaving the wounded man in charge of his friends, hastened below. He found the steward, and directed him to sober off the drunken surgeon as speedily as possible.

He was about to return to the hurricane deck, when he caught a signal from the agitated daughter of the man who lay at death's door over their heads, and fearing lest she should learn the sad truth too soon, he hastened to meet and reassure her.

The occupants of the ladies' cabin had caught an inkling of the fracas forward, though they were as yet ignorant of the parties engaged. Then followed the piercing scream from above, preceded by pistol shots and followed by a heavy fall. They believed that some dread tragedy was being enacted, nor were their fears lessened by the sight of the young planter, whose hands were smeared with fresh blood.

Percy Talfourd did not deem it criminal to tell a pious lie, then, or rather to conceal a portion of the truth, and made response.

"Calm your fears, ladies. There has been an accident, but the man who was injured has no relatives among you. Mr. Brown was accidentally shot through the right knee, but I do not think there is any particular danger, with proper care."

"And papa—where is he?" faltered Marie.

"On the hurricane-deck—you shall see him soon, but not just now. You know Brown was one of his most intimate friends. You must wait patiently, Marie. Ladies, you will spare yourselves a painful sight if you confine yourselves to this cabin, and make no attempt to go on deck."

With a few whispered words to his betrothed, Percy Talfourd left the ladies' cabin and returned to the hurricane-deck, where Jules Beaufort lay, still breathing, but looking like one hovering on the very verge of the grave. A temporary awning had been erected over his head to ward off the burning rays of the sun, for it was the opinion of all that any attempt to move him would be the signal for his instant dissolution.

The injured young planter had been carried below by his friends, after a rude tourniquet had been applied to his limb, and now the different avenues of approach from below were guarded by trusty men, directed by the forethought of Percy Talfourd. He was fearful lest the truth should escape. If Mrs. Beaufort or Marie should make the discovery, nothing short of actual force could keep them from the side of the dying husband and father, and this he wished to postpone as long as possible, for Beaufort's sake, as well as their own.

In the meanwhile, matters were looking squally down between decks.

For a man of his long and varied experience, Captain Cool Blade was making very awkward work of this stroke of business. He acted more like a novice than a veteran. His blood seemed boiling. His spirits were so high that they fairly bubbled over. He was not content to let well enough alone, and by his offensive effusiveness he drew upon himself more attention than was either wise or prudent. He drank repeatedly, and though the liquor affected him no more than if it had been pure water, his actions and speech were those of one who was rapidly becoming intoxicated. His demeanor was insolent and overbearing, and it is not to be wondered at that those among the planters who believed they had given the desperado cause for offense, banded together for mutual defense, not knowing at what moment some one of their number might be assailed.

Captain Craven saw this, and for obvious reasons wished to avoid any further trouble aboard his boat. Watching his opportunity he drew the excited gambler aside and hurriedly pointed out the danger he was incurring.

"The sooner you get out of this, the better for all

of us," he urged. "I'll pull in to shore, and let you off. It is not so far to a landing. Better a tramp through the swamps than a stret-bed neck."

"So! you think that there is danger of my being lynched by these honorable gentlemen, do you?" and as he spoke, Captain Cool Blade surveyed the knots of whispering planters with a sneering smile.

"It will come to that, sure! You have been rubbing salt into their sores ever since you knocked over Jones. You act more like a crazy school-boy than yourself. Get ready for a quick jump into the brush—or salt won't save you!"

The warning of the captain produced an effect directly opposite to the one he had hoped for. The gambler was cooled down, but it was a coolness even more dangerous than had been the feverish heat of a short time before. In a clear, distinct voice Captain Cool Blade spoke:

"I have paid my passage on this boat, and I will leave it at no man's bidding until I have reached my destination. As for what has just occurred, no one can justly blame me. I accepted a sweeping challenge to play cards. I put up good money against good money. I played a square game, and won. As for the rest, that was forced upon me. I replied to a lie with a blow, and then granted the hot-headed fool the satisfaction he demanded. It was life against life. He had four shots to my two, and I bear the mark of one of them on my neck now. I killed him—just as I will kill any man or men that dares to raise a finger against me now."

These words were directed toward the consulting planters, and were uttered with a significance that could not be mistaken. The one man had cast his gauntlet of defiance at the feet of full three score, and for very shame they could not refuse to pick it up.

Captain Cool Blade read aright the meaning of the quick glances that they interchanged, and leaped a pace backward as he drew a revolver in each hand. This move was in order to keep all his enemies in front, and to protect his rear; but unfortunately for his hopes, the action brought him within arm's-length of the bar, and the keeper, grasping a heavy cut-glass decanter half-full of whisky, dealt him a terrible blow upon the head, from behind, felling him to the floor like a log.

Steel Spring, who had been an interested witness of all that had transpired, darted forward with a warning cry, but too late to avert the blow. The next moment he was crushed down and trampled over as the excited planters rushed forward to secure their game before he could regain his feet.

It was quite ten minutes before Captain Cool Blade could recall what had happened, and realize that he was bound and helpless in the hands of his enemies. And the first words he overheard were those of Percy Talfourd, who was protesting against the proposed lynching of the murderer.

"No doubt he deserves such a fate, but not for this. It was a fair duel, though I believe there was fraud used in the game of cards. Take the sum he won, and then put him ashore."

This was the decision finally arrived at, and the boat was started toward the land. As soon as the head was made fast, the prisoner was roughly bundled ashore; but his enemies were not content with this punishment alone. They were determined that the gambler should suffer all the disgrace of hanging, if not the actual pangs.

A noose was formed in a rope brought along for that purpose, and fitted around his throat in orthodox style, with the knot under his left ear. The loose end was flung over a limb, and drawn tight, then tied to a sapling beyond his reach. His hands were bound in front of him so that, with patience and perseverance, he could free himself. The loads were fired from his revolvers, and the weapons placed at his feet. Then, with taunts and mocking laughter, the reckless planters left him, sprung aboard the steamer, little dreaming where and under what strange circumstances their next meeting with the marooned gambler would take place.

The fests were cast off, and the War Eagle began moving away from the bank. As she did so, the marooned gambler heard a piercing scream, and saw a young woman spring upon the hurricane-deck, sinking upon her knees by the side of Jules Beaufort.

He forgot his own danger and disgrace in that sight. His eyes filled with an unholy light as they greedily drank in the pale beauty of the agitated maiden, watching her like the fabled basilisk until several men came between and shut out the vision.

"Some one who loves him—she shall feel my vengeance, too!" he cried, aloud, his voice that of a veritable fiend.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHO IS CAPTAIN COOL BLADE?"

THE efforts of the steward, who was not at all averse to a jest at another's expense, were quickly rewarded with at least a partial success, and the bibulous surgeon awoke from his drunken stupor, to find himself and berth flooded with ice-water. With a sounding imprecation he rolled to the floor, making an ineffectual grasp at a chair, but the steward did not wait to have that article shattered over his woolly cranium, but settled down astride the irate disciple of Esculapius, giving his head a vigorous shampooing with a big sponge from another pail of ice-water. Nor did he desist until his victim begged lustily for mercy.

How the matter was finally adjusted, deponent saith not, but sure it is that a few minutes before the capture of Captain Cool Blade, as already described, the surgeon made his appearance on the hurricane-deck, looking a little damp, but much the better for his unceremonious awakening.

Fearful lest Marie or her mother should learn from careless lips what had really occurred, Percy Talfourd resigned his charge to the surgeon, and descended to the cabin-deck, intending to guard his friends from the terrible tidings as long as possible. It was while on his way to the ladies' cabin that he witnessed the capture of Captain Cool Blade, and by his manly plea in his defense, prevented another tragedy from taking place.

He found Marie not a little excited, and somewhat reproachful. She had overheard some of the men talking about a duel, but fortunately did not guess how nearly those words concerned her and hers, and gently reproved her lover for the white lie he had told her.

Percy Talfourd, as many another had before him, discovered how surely one falsehood begets another, but he was equal to the occasion. There had been a duel, arising from a dispute over a game of cards, and young Brown had been the sufferer, while the man who shot him was even now about to be put ashore.

Like many another Southern girl, Marie Beaufort had been reared in the belief that the "code" was an honor instead of a disgrace to a civilized community, and expressed a girlish curiosity to witness the landing of the successful duelist. Fearful of arousing her suspicions, Percy led her through her state-room and out upon the guards. From this point they witnessed the landing, Marie, as she recognized the man who had made such a daring leap from the deck of the Water Witch, being a little inclined to sympathize with him. Talfourd was not satisfied that she should take this view of the matter, and was proceeding to tell her who and what the man really was, when they clearly overheard one man say to another:

"We should have hung him, by rights, in good earnest. He killed poor Beaufort—"

Marie Beaufort, realizing the truth as by instinct, darted away from her lover's side, and reaching the narrow flight of steps before he could arrest her, rushed up to the hurricane-deck. The first object that met her distracted gaze was the prostrate form of her father, over whom the surgeon bent with blood-stained hands, and an agonized shriek broke from her lips as she flew to his side and sunk upon her knees.

Talfourd was quickly beside her, but she resisted his efforts to remove her until he bade her remember that such a display of her grief would but increase the danger of her parent. Then she yielded, and half-leading, half-carrying her nerveless form, he descended from the hurricane-deck, knowing that another painful task awaited him; that of breaking the news to the planter's wife.

Though a drunkard, Dr. Metcalf was a skillful surgeon, enthusiastic in the exercise of his profession, and when he understood the urgent need there was of his services, he freely forgave the steward the heroic treatment he had been subjected to. Only pausing to assure himself that Brown could wait a little longer, the flow of blood having been so promptly stanching by the impromptu tourniquet, he hastened to the side of Jules Beaufort.

At the first glance he believed there was no earthly hope, and he, like Talfourd, wondered greatly that the planter had lived even thus long. Nor was his surprise any the less great, though owing to another cause, when he came to examine the double wound. Then came the interruption from Marie, but the moment she was removed, he looked around him for the solution. He found it in the coat worn by the planter. Whether by chance or forethought, when the coat was buttoned up, a thick note-book and package of papers rested directly over the heart of the wearer. These, an inch thickness of heavy paper, had been penetrated by the twin bullets, the force of which had been so deadened that they had both been stopped by a rib-bone, though this was fractured by the heavy shock. And as the surgeon dextrously manipulated his probe, he found that the battered bullets lay there side by side among the bits of splintered bone.

He was just extracting the second bullet, when Percy Talfourd returned from taking Marie to her mother. His object was to learn the whole truth, and to make preparations for a final interview between the planter and his family. What then was his joyful surprise at the favorable report made by the surgeon! It seemed incredible, and he could hardly trust the evidence of his own eyes as the surgeon exhibited the bits of battered lead and the perforated note-book.

"The shock must have been a terribly severe one, or Mr. Beaufort would have been upon his feet ere now," uttered Metcalf. "A slight and temporary paralysis of the heart, that will gradually wear away. By this time to-morrow the patient will be nearly as well as ever."

While delivering this oracular opinion, the surgeon was neatly salving and bandaging the wounds, but Talfourd did not wait to hear him to an end. He hastened below with the glad tidings, and within half an hour Jules Beaufort was removed and lying in his own state-room. Yet there was something in his case that the doctor could not understand. He knew that the wound, though severe, was not dangerous, yet the planter lay like one at death's door, a strange, hunted look in his restless eyes.

Perhaps, could he have known of the words that Captain Cool Blade hissed into the ear of his fallen antagonist, or have taken one glance through the fog that hung over the past, the worthy surgeon would have understood the case of Jules Beaufort a little more thoroughly.

By the time the leg of young Brown was amputated, just above the knee, dinner was over and the male passengers, according to custom, congregated around the bar forward, for their bitters.

Equally as a matter of course, the startling events of that forenoon formed the topic of conversation. From this to discussing the reputation of Captain Cool Blade was a natural transition, and hardly a man present but had some bold, reckless or sanguinary exploit to tell about the gambler. If the incidents related were one-half of them true, then a more audacious, dare-devil desperado never drew the breath of life.

"As you know, my brother is chief of police at New Orleans," said the one of the planters who appeared to be the most intimately acquainted with the inside history of Captain Cool Blade. "From him I have learned some points about the fellow that the public in general do not know. Though only rumors, they came from a reliable source, and I have no doubt there is truth at the bottom."

"We all know that there is, and has been for years, a vast criminal league existing throughout the entire South and South-west, comprising murderers, highway robbers, horse-thieves and counterfeiters. It has been hinted that this Captain Cool Blade is one of the most influential leaders, if not the actual chief of this criminal association. A number of others have been pointed out as officers, and the informant, so the unknown and mysterious personage, has almost completed a bargain with the Governor of Louisiana, agreeing to give away the entire

league, to reveal their secret rendezvous, their signs and passwords, in consideration of a free pardon for all past offenses and a large sum of money. If the bargain is completed, as there is good reason to believe will be the case, we may yet have the pleasure of witnessing the gallant captain perform an airy dance upon nothing—and here is hoping that glad day may speedily dawn upon us!"

"Does anybody know when and under what circumstances he first assumed the name he now bears?" inquired one of the party. "Of course it is a *nom de guerre*—he was never christened thus, surely!"

"I have never heard that it came from any particular exploit," responded the first speaker. "I fancy he assumed the name and title simply because it sounded oddly, and well suited his character—for a cooler blade in situations of peculiar danger never walked the earth. He is utterly devoid of fear, and the greater the risk there is to be run, the better he likes it. Only it seems as though he was beginning to lose his iron nerve, judging from his strange excitement to-day; and it was well for some of us that such was the case. If he had been himself, there would have been more than one dead man aboard the War Eagle before we could have overpowered him."

"It was a foolish deed to make him our bitter enemy, and then turn him loose. We haven't heard the last of him," gloomily uttered one of the party.

"And if we hadn't put him ashore, the dare-devil would have picked another quarrel, sure," laughed Kingsley. "That was all we could do. He shot Beaufort fairly enough. We couldn't hang him for that. It was life against life, and he came out winner."

"What was it he said to Jules, up there, after he shot him? I failed to catch the words."

"You can't prove it by me. I think, after weighing the whole matter, that there was some old grudge at the bottom of this affair. It must have been something serious, though, judging from the startling change it made in the gambler."

"Beaufort used to be a pretty wild blade before he changed his name. If the rumor you mentioned is founded on truth, the solution may possibly be found there. It is not impossible—"

"You mean that Beaufort may be the informer, and that Captain Cool Blade shot him on that account?" slowly uttered Kingsley.

"I only say that such a supposition would explain the whole affair—but I don't say that I believe such is really the case."

Before any response could be made, a terrible shock shook the War Eagle from stem to stern, knocking half of the party from their feet, upsetting chairs and office furniture, breaking off chandeliers, and creating a frightful panic among the passengers. Instantly the cry arose that the boat had been snagged and was sinking rapidly!

CHAPTER X.

THE DOUBTS OF A LOVER.

DEEPLY enraged though Abner Clark was, the moment that his rival in love cried out in token of defeat, he arose to his feet and suffered Dean Ashley to follow his example. Though short, the fight had been fierce and desperate. Both men were severely bruised, and each had received marks that would be worn for many a long day, but the condition of Dean Ashley was decidedly the worse. The heavy fist of the angry lover had utterly destroyed the dandified stranger's beauty for some time to come. His own hurts were severe, but he felt them not then; he had paid Dean Ashley in full for the mental tortures which that worthy, in conjunction with Dorinda Colby, the rural coquette, had inflicted upon him during the past week.

"Now you two want to shake hands over this little skirmish, and you'll be better friends then ever," suggested the big alligator-hunter.

"When I offer him my hand, 'twill be with a knife or pistol in it," huskily muttered Ashley, brushing the blood from his eyes. "Give me my weapons and let me go—curse ye, one and all!"

"I don't reckon you got quite lickin' enough, a'ter all, ef you did squeal out like a pig under a gate," growled Adams. "But I reckon you got enough fer once. Take your weepsons, but mind ye! I don't trust ye no furdur then a mud-turkle kin throw a bull-gator by the tail, an' ef you try any o' your slippery tricks, I'll go through ye like soft soap through a tin horn! Take your weepsons, straddle your critter an' light out o' this quicker then thunder kin sour fresh milk! We don't like the smell o' your comp'ny. Git!"

"A dozen to one—you can afford to talk bold," muttered the young man, with a painful sneer. "Big as you are, if we were only man to man, with no outsiders to interfere, you wouldn't dare crow so loud. But the time will come—"

"Sooner then you think fer, ef you don't button up your lip an' git up an' git. You kin hev the chance at me, ef you like, fer I'm goin' to see you safe away from this. You've got too much of the copperhead in you, to be turned loose with weepsons in your hands when kiver is so handy. Fu'st we knew, you'd take a coward's shot from ambush. Straddle your critter an' skin out; an' don't fergit thet I'm on your trail, sar-pint!"

Dean Ashley was more completely used up than he had realized, and the feeling of deathly faintness and qualmishness grew upon him so rapidly that he found himself obliged to call to Amariah Colby, who stood eying him with poorly concealed uneasiness, to lend him a hand in mounting his horse.

Big Jim Adams watched the two closely, his suspicions being strengthened with each passing moment. Amariah Colby was too obsequious for one of his naturally blunt, crabbed disposition. His attitude toward the battered stranger was not unlike that of an humble servant who fears the lash. The few words that passed between them were not spoken loud enough for the alligator-hunter to catch their purport, but that the parting was not the most friendly, the clenched fist which Dean Ashley shook at the swamp magnate as he rode unsteadily away, was ample proof.

True to his threats, Adams followed close upon the heels of the discomfited stranger, and was quickly swallowed up by the gloomy forest.

The first action of Abner Clark was to wash the blood and dirt off his hands, and then don his outer garments, his next to look around in quest of Dorin-

da. He had formed a manly resolution, which he was in haste to put into execution. He knew his own weakness, and knew that if he gave himself time to debate the question his courage would surely fail him in the time of need.

The maiden was sitting in the same spot she had occupied when Dean Ashley came up. It may be said here that Dorinda had been a witness of the fight from first to last, and could Abner have guessed the hopes and fears that agitated her breast during the struggle, he would not have considered his cause quite so doubtful.

Dorinda saw him coming, although her gaze was directed down the river as though her only interest was in detecting the first sign of the expected steamboat. She saw, too, that Abner had plucked up his courage, and had little difficulty in divining the purpose with which he was seeking her. True to her sex, she was resolved not to surrender until the time of her own choice came, and as Abner drew near, she abruptly turned upon him and carried the war into the enemy's country, without waiting to be attacked first.

"I should think you would be ashamed to come here so soon after your ruffianly conduct," she said, severely. "Fighting like a wild beast—and making me the laughing-stock of the whole neighborhood, thanks to your ridiculous jealousy. Lucky that I am going away so soon! I couldn't hold up my head or dare look anybody in the face if I had to stay here—ain't you ashamed of yourself, now?"

The attack was a sharp one, and had not Abner Clark been so thoroughly aroused, it would doubtless have been successful. As it was, he believed her admirably feigned anger was real, but not even that could divert him from his purpose.

"If you mean am I ashamed of thrashing that dandified scoundrel Ashley, as he calls himself, I can tell you no, I am not," he said, with a dogged resolution that told Dorinda her cause was in far greater danger than she had imagined. "What I gave him then is only an earnest of what he will get if I ever catch him fooling around my promised wife again. And that is what I want to speak to you about, Dora. You can't have him and me for followers, at the same time. If you like him best, say so in as many words, and I'll pull up stakes for good. I'll never play second fiddle to any man, in such a matter. If I can't be first, then I'll be nothing."

Dorinda saw that her tactics would not answer in this case. Abner was in too deep earnest for that, but she was not ready to yield yet, nor to come to a final understanding, and turning her head quickly she responded to an imaginary call from the house, arising and beating a swift retreat before Abner could intercept her.

With the proverbial blindness of a man who is over head and ears in love, the young farmer put an unfavorable construction upon this action, and with his heart feeling as heavy as a chunk of lead in his bosom, he dropped to the ground beneath a tree, and stared moodily down the river.

Here Big Jim Adams found him an hour later, on his return from his scout after Dean Ashley, whom he followed only long enough to satisfy himself that the beaten man's retreat was a genuine one.

"Well, lad," seating himself with a careless force that shook the ground, "ef I do say it to your face, you walked into that p'izen critter's meat-house in first-class style. He's got a dose that'll keep him out o' mischief for a month to come. But you don't want to go to sleep over it, nuther. He'll file his teeth an' fresh p'int his spurs, an' come ag'in at ye. Then the man that gits the drop on the other fust, 'll come out atop the heap."

"He's welcome to all he can make out of me," was the brief and moody response.

"They's another thing I wanted to tell you, which you mustn't take it amiss. I know how matters stand atween you and Dory. It'll come out all right ef you only put the cairb on. She's young an' a trifle skittish, but she only needs to feel a master a-hold of the reins, an' she'll settle down quiet in the traces. Tain't no question of her that troubles me the most, though; it's the old man, an' the 'fluence he holds over you 'long o' Dory's bein' his daughter."

"You've seen how thick him an' the feller you licked was together; looked like they was pardners, but that the young feller hed the biggest say-so. The old man 'peared afraid of him. Well, you've hearn tell of Cap'n Cool Blade an' his cussed gang o' cut-throats, which some say hes a nest not fur from here? Now I kin prove that young Ashley is a side-pardner of the cap'n's. Then it stan's to reason that Colby knows more about the rascals than an honest man should, an' tharfo' will bear watchin'."

"What I'm drivin' at is this; don't let the old man draw you into any scrape through your likin' fer Dory. I don't say he'll try it, but he may."

Further speech was cut short by the appearance of a smoke down the river, and believing that the approaching boat was the War Eagle, Dorinda was summoned to be in readiness.

It was no longer the capricious coquette, but the true and loving-hearted woman that stole to where Abner Clark was moodily watching the line of black smoke. He started up at her approach, but even yet he did not read the truth that beamed from the softened eyes. He only felt that there must be a final understanding between them before the rapidly approaching boat should reach the landing, and taking her hand, he drew her unresistingly aside, where they could converse without being seen or overheard.

"I can't let you go without your giving me an answer, once for all, Dora," he said, speaking rapidly. "I wouldn't live through another week such as the last one, for all the money in the State. It must be all or nothing, now. Don't speak before you think. There's one life, and it may be two, that's depending on your words. You must give up all others for me, or else tell me that you cannot. In that case, I'll tell you good-by now, for you'll not find me here when you return. I'll sell out and strike for California, and try to forget you in the gold-diggings."

"Abner—I vowed I would never confess it, but I can't help myself when you talk like that," impulsively uttered the maiden, drawing closer to his side. "I have been a silly fool for the past week. I was dazzled by that—that fellow's dashing manner, but through it all, I knew that you were worth a thousand such as he—and I was praying all the time that you might whip him—and I wanted to tell

you how sorry I was for my flirting, but I didn't dare—"

As there were no witnesses to the scene which followed, a literal description cannot be expected. Certain it is that Dorinda looked even more lovely than usual when the reconciled lovers came out from the friendly covert as the steamer hove in sight, while Abner trod as though upon air, and felt his severe bruises no more than he did the old pain at his heart, now that the dark clouds had disappeared from Love's horizon.

Neither he nor Dorinda were disappointed when they found that the steamboat was the *Water Witch* instead of the long-looked-for *War Eagle*. It would give them so much more time to spend in parting words, and now that the black clouds had fairly blown away, they found so much to say, to plan, to promise, that a whole week would have been all too short for the business.

Dinner was eaten, and then the reconciled lovers resumed their painfully-pleasant communion. Not a moment was wasted, and for the first time Dorinda began to regret the visit she had looked forward to with so many delightful anticipations. It would not have taken much persuasion on Abner's part to have made her unpack and give over the trip, but he, simple fellow! did not even suspect this. He knew how long she had been anticipating the journey, and though it seemed like taking the heart out of his bosom to part with her, now that all was made clear between them, would not try to spoil her pleasure by idle repinings.

So the afternoon wore away, and still the *War Eagle* did not make her appearance. Not until the sun was setting; then the line of black smoke from her stacks became visible. All had been made ready, and side by side the lovers sat watching the smoke. Then the steamer came into view around the bend a mile below, and keen-eyed Jim Adams declared that he recognized the spread-eagle between her huge smoke-stacks.

On came the steamer, all too swiftly for the lovers, whose hearts sunk strangely as the moment of parting drew nearer. Ten minutes more, and they must say good-by, perhaps forever!

But before one-half of that time had expired, Dorinda sprang to her feet with a loud cry of horror, as she hid her face in her lover's bosom!

CHAPTER XI.

A GLIMPSE THROUGH THE FOG.

WITH fierce intentness Captain Cool Blade watched the maiden kneeling beside her wounded father until Percy Talfourd interfered and led her down from the hurricane-deck, and he registered a bitter oath that she, too, should suffer for the wrongs done him long years ago.

"It may be his daughter," dropped almost unconsciously from his lips as the *War Eagle* gathered headway and breasted the strong current. "I remember that his wife was expecting her confinement when—when he, whom I loved and trusted as a brother rather than a friend alone, turned upon me like a snake in ambush, and struck his poison fangs deep down in my heart. Curse him and his! I will never know rest while a single root or branch of the treacherous stock is living! I swear the death-hunt against them, old and young!"

His mutterings became inarticulate, and he stood motionless as a statue until the *War Eagle* had passed so far up the river that those mocking enemies upon her deck could no longer spy upon his actions. Then he set to work earnestly, soon succeeding in freeing his hands, and cast the ignominious noose from around his neck. Picking up his knife and brace of revolvers, he quickly reloaded the latter, and then strode swiftly away from the spot, heading up the river bank.

His brain was busied with the dark and bitter past. Step by step he recalled the events which had made him what he was now, a blood-stained and crime-hardened outcast. Right or wrongly, he attributed all this to the treachery of one man—of him whom he had shot down upon the hurricane-deck, Jules Beaufort, or, to give him the name which he bore in the days gone by, Jacques Bouchier.

That was more than a score years ago. Jacques Bouchier and Henry Peyton were sons of bosom friends and neighboring planters. They were inseparable companions from early childhood, particularly in mischief. Scarcely were they out of one scrape before they were over head and ears in another. Some of their pranks would have been serious misdemeanors in any other lads than the respective heirs of the two most extensive plantations in Mississippi. But it was noticeable even thus early, that whatever blame or punishment followed these escapades, by far the lion's share was bestowed upon Henry Peyton. And so it was as they attained their majority and striking out in life for themselves, they enlarged their operations. Henry Peyton did the most, while Jacques Bouchier profited the most. It was all so clear now, but then the bolder spirit of the two never for a moment suspected that he was being used as a cat's-paw by the man whom he loved more than a brother.

They were wedded on the same day, and to cousins. They settled down upon adjoining plantations, and when at home, were highly reputable citizens. It was often remarked that marriage had wrought a wonderfully beneficial alteration in them both.

But this was only outwardly. They were frequently absent from home, and then their real characters shone forth. They were twin birds of prey, traveling in cunning disguise, and plucked many a verdant pigeon between them. They had many an exciting adventure, many a narrow escape from justice, and finally, what must surely come sooner or later between men whom crime links together, they quarreled between themselves. With such men, it is generally a word and a blow, and though the bond between them was still so strong that neither drew a deadly weapon, Jacques Bouchier was most unmercifully thrashed. This defeat he never forgot or forgave, though he took the hand and blunt apology which the victor offered him, in apparent sincerity.

From that moment Jacques Bouchier secretly and persistently plotted the ruin of his one-time dearest friend. By day and by night he cunningly wove his toils, and when all was ripe, he fired the train he had so patiently and surely laid.

Through his tempting, mainly, though Peyton only too readily fell in with the plan, it was agreed

that they two should rob a bank. The attempt was made, but foiled, though in the fight which followed one man was killed and another seriously wounded. Only for the double treachery of his friend, so-called, Peyton would have escaped; but a traitor's blow from behind knocked him senseless, and he awoke to consciousness only to find himself a handcuffed prisoner on the way to jail, while Jacques Bouchier acted as one of his guards!

Not even yet did Peyton realize how terribly he had been betrayed, how thoroughly duped. He wondered at the fact of his companion in crime being permitted to go free, or at least unbound, but with stubborn fidelity he said not a word that could implicate Bouchier. From that night they did not meet again until Henry Peyton appeared before the bar of justice to answer for his crimes; but the prisoner had received a message from his friend, and felt at ease. A noted criminal lawyer—so at least he was introduced by the note from Bouchier—came to him with cheering news. There would be no trial, because there would be no prisoner when the hour for the trial drew near. Their plans were all perfected. He, Peyton, was only to keep a guard upon his tongue, and patiently wait for the right moment.

This he did, though there was much in the affair that sorely troubled him whenever he essayed to puzzle it all out. But the hour of trial came, and still the rescue had not taken place. And then, bit by bit, his eyes were opened and he slowly began to realize the truth—to see how damnably he had been betrayed.

From the witness-stand Jacques Bouchier told the story of the plot to rob the bank, but he made the prisoner out to be the tempter. He said that at first he believed it was all an empty jest, and as they both had been drinking freely, he fell in with the humorous conceit, and the details were all arranged. But the next day the prisoner convinced him that he was in sober earnest. The witness remonstrated, but in vain. The prisoner said that the job should be done, even if he had to look up another partner. Finally the witness agreed to play his part, which he did as follows:

He gave information to the bank officials of the intended job. They thought it best to take the robber in the act, and stationed a force of policemen in ambush for that purpose. Bouchier acted as decoy, and gave the signal that brought the police out of the vault. It was his hand that felled the prisoner, and thus averted further bloodshed and loss of life.

Like one in a dream Henry Peyton listened to the evidence of his faithless friend. He knew then that he was lost beyond all hope, but even that knowledge was less bitter than was the discovery of how he had been duped and betrayed by the playmate of his youth, the friend and confidant of his manhood.

The "noted criminal lawyer" betrayed him, too. His pretended defense only served to clinch each and every point made against his client, and, seeing how thoroughly his work had been done for him, the State attorney contented himself with a brief summary of the case, and submitted it to the jury. The judge followed with a charge that was strong against the prisoner, and though the jury went through the form of retiring for consultation, no one was surprised at their return almost immediately, with a verdict of guilty.

Henry Peyton, found guilty of murder in the first degree, was sentenced to death by hanging.

By the prompt and untiring exertions of his relatives and the friends of the family, the Governor was prevailed upon to commute the sentence to one of imprisonment for life at hard labor. This much they did, to save the name from worse disgrace, but then they vowed to forget that such a person as Henry Peyton had ever lived. The prison gate closed upon him, and he was as one dead to the world.

He was not dead. He swore to live until he had drank deep of revenge. His every thought was devoted to that one end, until he became a monomaniac. He knew now why Jacques Bouchier had kept him quiet with promises. If he had known the truth in time, he could have told some awkward stories, and caused undoubted proofs of their truth to be procured. But after the trial and condemnation, even if he should speak, who would believe him? It would all be set down as the false ravings of one who sought revenge upon the man whose cunning had brought him to justice.

With all his mad lust for revenge, Henry Peyton ran no foolish risks, and it was nearly three years before he found the right material to work upon. He found it in one of the assistant doctors, a young man, strongly addicted to drink and cards.

Peyton worked upon these two failings, and finally convinced the man that he was promising no more than he could perform when he swore that he would make his deliverer from prison comfortably rich for life.

The young doctor formed a bold and hazardous plan, which called for a wonderful amount of nerve on Peyton's part, but which promised success. And that plan was carried out.

Peyton was taken ill, and removed to the sick ward. He steadily grew worse, thanks to the drugs administered by the physician. And then he died.

The doctor produced a written agreement, signed by the dead man, that gave him the body for dissection after death. The prisoner was examined by the head surgeon, and pronounced a corpse. The body was nailed up in a rude coffin, and conveyed to the doctor's rooms. There it remained until he had drawn the money from the bank where it had been deposited by Peyton under an assumed name, long before his trial and condemnation.

The doctor was true to his bargain. He resuscitated the seemingly dead man, and after he had in a degree recovered his strength, Henry Peyton disguised himself and entered the living world once more, in quest of vengeance upon his false friend.

A terrible shock awaited him at the very outset. His wife, whom he had loved passionately, was dead—had died on the night of his condemnation. Grief had brought on a premature confinement, and both mother and child were buried in the same grave.

One more count against Jacques Bouchier!

That worthy had left the country immediately after the trial, finding himself in bad odor even among the most rigid adherents of justice. The treacherous part he had played was condemned by

all, and amid ugly threats of lynching, he fled the State. His wife and child followed him a few months later, and then he had sold his plantation. One by one his few relatives had died, and search never so closely, Henry Peyton could find no trace of his hated enemy.

The years rolled on, and still Henry Peyton—now known far and wide as Captain Cool Blade, the most skillful gambler on the river, one who carried his life at the tips of his fingers—was still a wanderer seeking Jacques Bouchier. He was something more—the head of a powerful and wide-spread organization, to which robbery in every shape was a regular business, and bloodshed a pastime.

Jacques Bouchier, under the name he had been known by ever since his flight from Mississippi, Jules Beaufort, became a member of this league, but one of his naturally treacherous dispositions could not long resist the heavy rewards that were offered for definite information concerning the criminal band, and he entered into a correspondence with the government officials. He hung off for a higher premium, and before the negotiations were concluded, the yellow fever broke out in its usual virulence, and he took passage for St. Louis on board the *War Eagle*, with his wife and daughter, accompanied by Percy Talfourd.

Through one of his spies, Captain Cool Blade was informed of the pending negotiations, and at once visited New Orleans in order to silence the treacherous member of the league, in case the report proved to be founded on fact. An hour too late he was informed of the departure of his game, and followed upon the *Water Witch*, which proved to be the next boat to take her departure.

How he made the transfer from one boat to the other, has already been explained, but Captain Cool Blade never dreamed of what really awaited him on board the *War Eagle*.

He recognized Jacques Bouchier the moment he saw his face, but he never imagined that he was Jules Beaufort, as well. That object, all important before, had been wholly lost sight of in the flood of hatred and revenge that filled his heart and brain as he recognized his faithless friend of long ago.

In the boasting challenge of the half-drunken planter, he saw an open road to vengeance, and he followed it to the end. A covert signal to Captain Craven told that worthy what marked cards to fetch, and cool audacity accomplished the rest.

"He knew who killed him and so shall she!" muttered Captain Cool Blade, as he pushed rapidly up the river bank, after having cut across a broad bend made by the stream. "But she shall not die so easily—she is too lovely for that! She shall pay back a portion of the torments I suffered in that accursed prison! She and all others who may carry any of his blood in their veins—Ha!" he exclaimed, stopping short. "By—! the *War Eagle* has run on a snag!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE WAR EAGLE'S LAST FLIGHT.

BUT Captain Cool Blade was wrong in his sudden conclusion, as his experienced eye told him the moment after his sharp exclamation. The *War Eagle* had not run against a snag, but instead had grounded upon a sandbar that the rapidly shifting waters had formed within a few hours. The whirling waters, covered with foam, driftwood and floating debris, had hidden the peril from the eyes of the pilot, who, if the truth must be told, had swallowed a little more liquor than was prudent when the river was at the flood.

The passengers aboard the *War Eagle* were a great deal longer in arriving at the truth. The alarm of "a snag" is to voyagers upon the great rivers much what the cry of fire is to those on the ocean. As a general thing, steamboats are poorly provided with boats, and when a steamer is badly snagged, the wreck is frequently terribly sudden and complete. It is far easier to keep afloat in salt water than it is in the whirling eddies and swift currents of the rivers, and the terrified passengers on board the *War Eagle* appeared to be fully aware of the fact.

For a few minutes the confusion was intense. Men cursed and blasphemed as they recovered their feet and ran confusedly to and fro. Women shrieked, some fainted, others lost their presence of mind and would have jumped overboard in their mad terror, had they not been forcibly prevented. There was a fierce rush for the yawl which hung at the stern, and the other boat which lay bottom up on the hurricane-deck. But haste makes waste, and before either could be lowered into the water, the captain and the other officers of the *War Eagle* succeeded, by dint of shouting at the top of their voices, and even using force, in convincing the panic-stricken passengers that there was no danger whatever, that the boat had simply run aground on a sand-bar.

The revulsion was as comical as it was profound. Not one aboard would admit that he or she had been terrified, and the most cowardly among the lot were now the loudest in talking of their coolness, and of the number of poor, foolish creatures they had saved from leaping overboard to meet with certain death.

The engines were set to work, the action of the mammoth wheels reversed, and a strong effort made to back off from the bed of sand. The broad buckets churned the muddy water into froth and spray, sending the curling waves in swift succession down the river in diverging lines until they broke against the banks on either side, eating away the unstable soil at the water-line until the heavy splashes of caving banks grew more frequent than ever. The boat quivered and trembled from stem to stern, but made no backward motion. It had run aground while under a full head of steam; the moist sand had yielded before the stroke, only to settle again around the hull, holding the vessel like so much glue.

The experienced mate soon realized that the paddle-wheels would not extricate the *War Eagle* unaided, and gave the word for the freight which cumbed the forward deck to be moved further back, both to lighten the bows and to give room for working the huge spars by the aid of the capstan.

Under the eye of the stern, deep-voiced mate, all the necessary arrangements were speedily made. The butts of the great pine spars were swung clear of the deck, and pushed ahead of the bows, on each

side, then lowered until they rested on bottom. The pulleys and tackle were already properly adjusted, and the machinery was put in motion. The spars slowly sunk deeper into the soft sand until they could find firmer holding. The ropes moved through the blocks and pulleys, while the engines kept up a loud and discordant clanking.

Among those who watched the various maneuvers below, were Marie Beaufort and Percy Talfourd. They stood upon the hurricane-deck, forward of the pilot-house, the cool breeze which swept down the river tempering the heat of the sun until the temperature was quite agreeable.

Marie, on learning that the wounds of her father were by no means dangerous, had rallied from the dreadful shock she had received, and leaving her mother watching beside the patient, she gladly accepted the invitation of her lover to join him in watching the sparring process. She was far less serious than Talfourd, and finally she playfully rallied him on his moody abstraction.

"I shall believe you are regretting having broken your allegiance to the 'Can't-Get-Away' club, Percy, unless you return to earth and poor me, pretty soon. Here I have been asking you question after question, and though you did manage to answer them by yes or no, I don't believe you can tell me one thing I was asking about. It is fortunate we are both pretty well known to the passengers aboard, or they would be ready to take oath that we were a married couple of twenty years standing!"

"I wish we were—not the twenty years, but the married part," impulsively uttered Talfourd, an eager fire replacing the moody light in his fine eyes. "If I could only persuade you to reconsider, Marie, and abridge the time—"

"It is not so long to wait—only a few months—only until the frost comes and renders it safe to return home," softly and shyly murmured the maiden.

"Each day apart from you is an age, darling—"

"But we need not be apart—need we? We will see each other every day, for you promised to wait for and return with us from St. Louis."

"But how much pleasanter it would be—darling, please say that you will marry me as soon as we arrive in St. Louis. It would make our holiday summer perfect, and it will be the best for us all, I am confident. Say that you will."

But the maiden did not speak the words he pleaded for. Though she loved him dearly with her entire soul, as he fully deserved to be loved, she had set her mind on being married in the old house not many miles from the Crescent City, which had been her home since early childhood—since birth, as she erroneously believed. Not even her lover's ardent pleading could shake her determination on this point, though she kept her main reason in the background, pleading her father's accident as an all-sufficient excuse. Neither did the young planter put forward all of the reasons which had induced him to urge an anticipation of the wedding-day.

Though there was no great friendship, nor even a close intimacy between his prospective father-in-law and himself, Percy Talfourd knew Jules Beaufort much more thoroughly than did either the wife or daughter. He knew that the planter was fast killing himself with drink and excitement. Within the past month there had been many ugly rumors afloat concerning Beaufort, some of which Talfourd undertook to trace home, only to find them the offspring of truth. He believed that there was still worse behind, and the words which Captain Cool Blade hissed into Beaufort's ear, and which Percy caught, went far to confirm this belief. If Jules Beaufort was indeed Jacques Bouchier, as those words indicated, then his belief was confirmed beyond a doubt.

He felt positive that Beaufort was the one who had offered to sell the secrets of the great criminal league, and knew that if others should suspect the fact, his life would hang upon a thread that was liable to be severed at any moment.

Even if left to his own courses, he doubted whether the planter would live to see the coming of the frost.

Such, in outline, were the reasons why Percy Talfourd so urgently pressed his suit. Apart from his passionate longing to possess the fair maiden wholly, solely, entirely, he wished to protect and guard her as much as possible against the dreadful shock which he foresaw could not be very far distant in the future. But his arguments were in vain, since he dared not tell her the whole truth.

The spars were kept steadily at work for hours, and though success finally crowned their efforts, it was late in the afternoon before the War Eagle was afloat once more. Then it was found necessary to stop at the first wood-yard, not more than half a mile above, for fuel.

This occasioned another delay, and it was evident that the sun would set before the War Eagle could make her next stopping place, Colby's Landing.

It has already been mentioned that the pilot had been drinking rather more than was prudent for a man occupying such a responsible position, and, although it was really through no fault of his that the vessel grounded, that accident, by unsettling his nerves, led to his imbibing still more freely.

The War Eagle had rounded the last bend in the river and was in plain view of Colby's Landing; but she was destined never to reach that haven.

The pilot saw, or fancied he saw, indications right ahead of another freshly-made bar, and threw the wheel over with all his speed and strength. The vessel obeyed the wheel promptly, and was shooting swiftly in a diagonal course across the current, when it struck a snag with terrible force.

The hull was pierced as though composed of tissue-paper, but that was not the worst. The snag tore through the engine-room, and almost ere any one aboard could realize the fearful peril, its work was done.

The defective boiler exploded, shattering the vessel in a fearful manner, filling the wreck with blinding steam. And almost simultaneously the second boiler burst, completing the ruin, fairly breaking the wreck in two, near the middle.

The scene was one that no pen could even faintly outline. Many were killed instantaneously by the flying debris, and those were the more fortunate ones. Others were pinned fast under falling timbers, only to be scalded to death by the hissing steam. The air was rent with piercing shrieks of bitter agony and horrible pain, of terror and affright. The swift current was thickly strewn with bodies, dead

and alive. With every moment came the drowning, gurgling cry of some unfortunate as the waters closed over his or her head.

It was a scene of unspeakable horror!

CHAPTER XIII.

HEROES IN THE ROUGH.

SUCH was the sight, though greatly modified by the intervening space, that caused Dorinda Colby to utter a scream of horror and hide her paling face in the broad bosom of her sturdy lover, Abner Clark. The steamboat War Eagle, for which they had been so long waiting and watching, had exploded before their very eyes, and was now an utter wreck. But, though gladly would Abner Clark have afforded Dora shelter in his arms at any other time, he put her quickly, almost rudely away from him now, and his voice rung out like a trumpet call:

"Take to the boats, boys, and do what we can for those poor unfortunates! It's for life or death, and if we fail 'em now, may the Lord have mercy on their souls!"

The words had not fairly cleared his lips before Abner Clark was at the water's edge, beside a long, narrow skiff which was fastened to a log with chain and padlock. The key was in his pockets, somewhere, but he did not lose time in searching for it. Grasping the chain in both hands, he gave it a mighty jerk and wrench that tore the staple from its hold in the bow of the skiff, then gave the light craft a fierce shove as he leaped into it, that sent it out into and down the swift current.

He dropped upon the thwart, and with rapid dexterity fitted the oars to the thole-pins, whirling the boat around so its prow pointed down-stream. As he did so, he saw the men upon the bank in apparent confusion, and plainly losing invaluable time for lack of a competent leader.

"One man in each of the two skiffs, and the rest follow with the flat-boat!" he shouted at the top of his voice, not daring to pause for a moment in his long, swinging strokes to give them more definite orders.

But he caught a glimpse of the big alligator-hunter rushing to the spot from the woods, and knew that there would be no further delay.

After warning Abner Clark and putting him on his guard against Amariah Colby, Jim Adams had strolled away from the river-side satisfied that he had done his duty. He had been up nearly all the night before, for the neighbors had gathered to bid Dorinda farewell and God-speed, and though Amariah Colby put a stop to the dancing as the clock struck twelve, the roosters were saluting the dawning day as the party finally broke up.

This, together with the warmth of the afternoon, will account for the alligator-hunter's falling asleep in the shade of the tree beneath which he had seated himself. He was awakened by the sound of the explosion, and as he started to his feet, he caught the words shouted by Abner Clark as the young farmer sprung to his skiff.

He knew then that something terrible had occurred, and that there was work for men to do.

He heard the terse directions of Abner, but they were not necessary to show him what was to be done. He was as ready to plan as he was to execute, and possessed the faculty of making others obey without pausing to ask questions.

Besides the skiff in which Abner Clark was so swiftly speeding down-stream, there were two other almost similar ones fastened near by, in addition to a huge flat-boat that belonged to Amariah Colby, and was used for cordwood and sand hauling.

Jim Adams singled out two men who he knew were skillful with the oars, and hustled them into the skiffs, snapping the stout iron chains that secured them from floating away, with as much apparent ease as though they were made of straw, then shoved the boats away from land with all the power of his mighty arm.

"The rest o' you pile into the flat—lively! and grup the sweeps. Lord above! we ain't goin' out ter fish fer mud-turkles! Thar's men an' women an' children a-dyin' afore our very eyes, an' you a-movin' like you war goin' to thar funeral! Bend to it, now! break your backs! pull like the devil was grupp'n' at your coat-tails! jump her out o' the water! Oh thunder an' guns! ef you was runnin' a race with a snail you'd git beat so bad you wouldn't know which end your head was on! Look what a man kin do!"

The men, three at each broad and long sweep, were doing all they knew how, making the clumsy "broad-horn" move rapidly through the water, despite the disparaging comments of the excited alligator-hunter, who at first had taken up the steering-oar. But now he dropped this, and placing one hand against each of the sweeps, added his enormous strength to their efforts, and with such effect that their speed was almost doubled. The clumsy craft skimmed over rather than through the water, each stroke causing her to leap convulsively half her length ahead.

It was fortunate that, since the terrible accident could not be averted, the War Eagle struck and exploded so near Colby's Landing, in sight of men with willing hearts and strong hands to execute what the promptings of humanity directed. Fortunately, too, that these men, heroes in the rough, were well provided with the means to carry out their merciful wishes. Only for that, the tragedy would have been even more dreadful than it was.

Swift almost as a swallow, the strong and skillful arms of Abner Clark sent his skiff dancing over the turbid waters to the scene of the explosion. As he passed the snag, now standing almost straight up, its pointed head raised high above the water, Abner abandoned the thwart upon which he had been sitting, and knelt down on the bottom of the boat, facing the bow and pushing on the oars instead of pulling. By this means he could see all before him, and run direct for any object without a moment's delay.

Brief as had been the interval since the explosion of the War Eagle, the ranks of the victims struggling in the water had already been frightfully thinned, and as Abner Clark peered breathlessly through the thickening shades of evening, his blood turned cold with horror, for he began to fear that all on board the ill-fated steamer had perished.

But then he was seen, and from all around him came cries and appeals for help. And down the

river came the deep-toned response of the big alligator-hunter in the roomy flat-boat.

Abner sent his boat flying hither and thither with arms the muscles of which seemed insensible to fatigue, and picked up one after another of those calling for help. He knew that the skiff was so crank that any attempt at entering by climbing over the side would surely end in an upset, but he guarded against this by encouraging each one whom he rescued to simply hang on to the side of the skiff until he could transfer them to the flat.

By the time he had secured his first load, the other skiffs and the "broadhorn" had reached the scene. Before ten minutes more had elapsed, quite two dozen drowning wretches had been snatched from the hungry jaws of death. Then the work became less swift, for lack of material. The skiffs rowed swiftly to and fro over the water, while the men uttered their encouraging shouts at brief intervals, but the answers that came back were very few and far between.

The flat-boat was allowed to drift with the current, as those aboard knew that any survivors of the disaster must be floating near at hand and at the same rate with themselves.

One or two more rescues were made, of persons who had been injured either by the fall, by steam, or hurt by falling debris. They had been fortunate enough to secure themselves to a cotton bale or some fragment of the wreck before insensibility overpowered them, rendering them deaf to the shouts of those who were working hard to cheat grim old Death.

But at length even the most sanguine among the rescuing party began to feel that there was no further hope of saving life, and as they had already floated several miles down the river, they pulled in to shore.

All of the rescued passengers who were able to walk, were helped from the flat-boat up the steep bank and ropes were prepared for the heavy task of pulling or "tracking" the "broadhorn" and its helpless contents up along the shore to the Landing. This was a work of time and difficulty, for the current ran close to shore and very swiftly, while the bank above was thickly covered with undergrowth.

Just as the preparations were about completed, Abner Clark cried out excitedly:

"Hush! I heard a voice out yonder faintly calling for help—a woman's voice, I am almost sure!"

But nothing more was heard, though all stood with bated breath and painfully strained hearing. Nor did any answer come to the loud calls of the young farmer, and those about him were inclined to believe his fancy had misled him.

"It may be; but I am going out once more for luck," he muttered, doggedly. "You can strike out, I'll catch you up before you get to the Landing."

As he ceased speaking, he shot his skiff swiftly out in the direction from whence the faint appeal had apparently emanated, kneeling low in his boat the better to sweep the surface of the river. But the shadows of night had deepened so rapidly that he knew there was little chance of finding any floating being unless he could hear the cry again, and between every stroke of his oars, he uttered a long, shrill cry that he knew would reach a mile or more along the water.

Half an hour was spent in this way without success, and Abner, though reluctantly, was on the point of relinquishing the vain search, turning the prow of the skiff toward shore, when from directly in front arose the same faint cry that had barely caught his ear before.

Thrilled to his very core by the sound, Abner urged his boat forward with all his force, at the same time uttering a glad, encouraging shout. The next moment he felt a sharp shock that drove him forward upon his face, and as he struggled up again, he heard a gasping, gurgling cry and a faint splashing sound in the water.

As by instinct he knew that he had run against the object upon which was the being whom he was so anxious to save, knocking him or her into the water.

Without a moment's hesitation, he arose to his feet and leaped over the side of the boat. His outstretched hand struck a floating cotton bale, but there was no one clinging to it. With swift, strong strokes he swam around, seeking in vain for the person whom he had so unluckily precipitated into the water. His heart grew cold with fear, and almost frantic, he dove beneath the surface, time and again, in the faint hope of thus coming in contact with the drowning man or woman.

Then, guided by Providence, he found the object he sought, as it was slowly sinking deeper down into the treacherous depths, and he knew that, dead or living, he was grasping the form of a woman.

As quickly as possible he arose to the surface with his helpless burden, holding her head above water as he swam toward his boat, putting her in over the stern, then following after, himself. But he felt that he had only rescued a dead body from a watery grave!

CHAPTER XIV.

PLAYING THE SPY.

THERE was one other witness of the explosion and destruction of the War Eagle; one who hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry as he saw the proud steamer, its passengers and contents scattered far and wide over the bosom of the river. This was Captain Cool Blade, who, like the boat, was making all speed to reach Colby's Landing.

He had paused only a few moments to watch the motions of those on board when he saw that the War Eagle had only run aground, then hastened on his way. Now that he had, as he believed, killed his treacherous friend of former days, he could remember the object of his boarding the steamer in such a perilous manner. The sight of Jacques Bouchier had driven all else from his mind, and he had not even thought of asking whether Jules Beaufort, the false member of the League, was aboard the War Eagle or not. The remembrance soon came back to him, though, and he made all haste toward Colby's Landing, where he hoped to find Dean Ashley, whom he meant to put upon the track of the traitor.

He saw fresh hope in the grounding of the boat. It might be possible for him to reach the Landing and post Ashley in his duty before the War Eagle could spar off of the bar. If so, Dean could take

passage on the boat, ferret out the traitor and either kill him then, or else lay a trap for him at his destination, besides working down the other game.

But, thanks to the difficult traveling, Captain Cool Blade would have reached the Landing too late, if the accident had not occurred, when the War Eagle was nearly abreast his position.

A remarkably skilled swimmer, he might possibly have saved a life, if not more, by hastening to the rescue, but this venture he did not make. The treatment he had received on board the War Eagle had by no means tended to awaken his better feelings, and he stood leaning against a tree-trunk, coolly watching the despairing struggles of the drowning wretches before him.

"It will save trouble," he muttered, beneath his breath. "They will die, though not by my hand, as I intended—and would prefer. Still, I can look on and laugh at their vain, idle fighting against fate. That is a poor revenge, but better than nothing!"

He ceased muttering, with a sharp, hissing oath. The skiff pulled by Abner Clark just then came in sight, and as he mechanically started forward with clenched fists, he saw the other boats hastening down the river to the rescue.

"Well, let them save, and I will slay!" he said, with a sharp laugh, as he sunk down in the dense undergrowth. "It would be a pity for that lovely creature to die such a death, so early in life! I'll forgive them if they only rescue her—for me! Between us, Hortense and I can soon break her in. When she has aided to pay the debt her father—curse him!—owes me, the river can claim her again, for aught I care."

From first to last, Captain Cool Blade kept close watch of the rescuers as they pursued their noble work, moving down the river bank and keeping abreast the party until the flat-boat was finally brought to land. Then he flung away his hat and drew nearer as the uninjured men began scaling the bank. The darkness had deepened so much that he knew he was running little or no risk of discovery in so doing.

He passed through the wet, forlorn and shivering crew, covertly though keenly scrutinizing each face and figure as he passed, though the gloom rendered this any but a satisfactory inspection. One or two of the men he believed he could recognize, but neither of them were the ones he was desirous of finding.

He soon learned that there were two or three women in the boat below, and he hoped that the fair maiden he already hated for her father's sake, was among them. He did not care to run the risk of asking any questions, for he knew that all would be made clear when the Landing above was reached, and until then he could wait.

Indolence was not one of his failings, and when the long tracking-rope was in readiness, he was one of the first to grasp it, and put forth his strength with a will on the long, weary pull which ensued.

He felt a grim pleasure in picturing the surprise and consternation which the two planters, one before and the other just behind him, would feel if they could only know who was walking between them. They had been among the foremost in demanding that he should be lynched, after the fall of the planter in the duel, and one of them had fitted the rope around his neck with an insulting speech, when he was marooned. They would leap aside as swiftly as though they had trod upon a venomous serpent, should he make himself known to them, or even address one of them in his natural voice.

But Captain Cool Blade resisted the powerful temptation and bore steadily upon the rope as he walked along in the midst of his enemies. They should make the discovery of his presence in good time, but not just yet. They should pay heavily for the honor of his company, too. Bit by bit he was working out and putting into shape the details of a bold and brilliant scheme that bade fair to give him his sworn revenge in a substantial form.

Though the task was difficult and wearying, there was no flagging. A steady strain was kept upon the tracking-rope, and the men trampled down the brush and vines that impeded their passage, eager to reach Colby's Landing, where the wounded and helpless ones who were now lying on the bottom of the flat-boat could have their injuries attended to. A minute's unnecessary delay might cost a life.

The moment the flat-boat was fastened to its rude moorings, Captain Cool Blade quietly withdrew from his fellow-workers, and standing close against one of the long wooden piles, he watched the scene which followed and put the finishing touches to the daring scheme he had concocted.

The scene which followed the arrival of the flat-boat at the Landing was a peculiarly painful one. Until the lanterns and the huge fire which was quickly kindled, told the too plain story, many of the rescued men who had relatives aboard the ill-fated War Eagle, had hoped against hope that their loved ones might be still living, though injured, in the flat-boat. In only two instances were these hopes rewarded. The other wounded were still further tortured by the knowledge that all those near and dear to them had gone down in a watery grave.

The wounded and the women—strange to say that not a single child had been saved from the wreck—were taken to the houses and there cared for as well as possible under the circumstances, while the male passengers who were not disabled, gathered around the generous fire that was kindled of cordwood, to dry their garments and discuss the sad and bitter tragedy.

Captain Cool Blade knew that the party would take passage on the first boat that came along. Though this might be delayed for one or two days, so it might occur within an hour, in which case the bold project he had formed would be frustrated.

With an impatiently beating pulse, he stole swiftly here and there, seeking for Amariah Colby. Success rewarded his search at last, and a low, peculiar whistle arrested the swamp magnate and drew him with poorly concealed reluctance out of the circle of light into the deep, gloomy shadows.

"I've been looking for you this half-hour," uttered Captain Cool Blade, in the sharp, overbearing tone of a master addressing a slave. "Is Dean Ashley, or any others of the 'Family' at the Landing?"

"No; Dean left this afternoon; none of the others have been here since the first of the week," respond-

ed Colby in a low, nervous voice, so unlike his customary mode of speaking that the captain bent forward and peered into his face with growing suspicion.

But whatever his doubts, he did not deem it wise to give them utterance just then. He had work for the man to do. After that was accomplished, then he would probe the mystery to the bottom.

"Colby, there is work for you to do, in the interests of the Family. The first thing is for you to find out whether any person or persons by the name of Bouchier or Beaufort are among those saved from the wreck. Use all possible haste, consistent with prudence, in finding out, then return to me here with your report, for further orders. Mind: Bouchier or Beaufort."

Amariah Colby repeated the two names, then turned and hastened away from the spot like one who is glad to escape from a disagreeable ordeal. Once more Captain Cool Blade contracted his brows and frowned blackly. He knew Amariah Colby too thoroughly to attribute his strange nervousness wholly to the tragedy that had occurred. His heart was too cold for that, too utterly selfish. The fellow must be plotting some treachery against his hard taskmaster, else why his strange perturbation at the unexpected encounter?

"The fool had better blow his own brains out—that would be no surer mode of committing suicide," he muttered through his tight-clenched teeth, as he waited impatiently for the return of his suspected emissary.

From his position he could see Amariah Colby moving among the men who were grouped around the blazing fire in their staming clothes, but keenly as he watched, he could detect nothing more to justify his suspicions. In a few minutes he saw Colby move away from the fire, and cut across toward the dwelling-houses. He strode forward and intercepted the man, demanding:

"Well, what success? Speak out, quickly!"

"There were none among that party named either Beaufort or Bouchier. I'll try those in the houses, now. There's two men there, besides the women. I'll be back in five minutes."

Captain Cool Blade quietly stood aside and let the man pass; but his suspicions were still active. There must be some good reason for the unusual nervousness displayed by Colby.

For several minutes he paused in doubt, then with a sudden resolution he glided softly toward the nearest house, which chanced to be that belonging to and occupied by Amariah himself. There was a light shining brightly through the open window, and he did not dare approach the aperture too closely, lest his espial should be observed by some one out of doors, and he was not quite ready to court recognition.

Keeping beyond the circle of light, he moved slowly along until he could gain a fair view of the interior, at length pausing abruptly as he caught sight of Dorinda Colby and a young man bending over the form of a woman who lay at full length upon the lounge. Her face was turned toward him, but the man stood in such a position that his form shut off the view, though Captain Cool Blade glided back and forth with the quick tread of a hungry panther. Then—the man moved aside, and the pale face was fully revealed.

The gambler pressed both hands over his lips in order to choke back the exultant cry that rose in his throat.

CHAPTER XV. STILL AT WORK.

In that one swift glance Captain Cool Blade recognized the woman who lay upon the lounge so still and motionless, her eyes closed as though in death, her face as white and ghastly as a corpse. So unexpected was the discovery, despite the fact of his playing the spy for that very purpose, that it was with the greatest difficulty he smothered the wild, fierce cry of vindictive triumph that leaped up in his throat. But smother it he did, and turned away from the open window, retracing his steps to the spot where he had dismissed Amariah Colby upon his mission of espial.

He was not kept long in waiting. Colby had seen enough to know that his superior was not in the most angelic humor. To others the swamp magnate was independent enough, even domineering, as a general thing, but Captain Cool Blade was his master. He cringed and trembled to his very core whenever he was in his presence, and had the faintest doubt of the reception he was to receive. It was a purely natural phenomenon, but Colby could not understand it, and attributed the weakness to a supernatural influence. He believed that the captain had put a spell upon him.

"Well," muttered Captain Cool Blade, as Amariah Colby paused before him, "what success? What have you discovered?"

Though so greatly excited but a few moments before, there was not a trace of eagerness or agitation in his voice as the adventurer propounded these questions. Yet, somehow, the very quietness with which he spoke served to render Colby more nervous and ill at ease. It was with an evident effort that he responded:

"I have searched the houses as you bade me, beginning with my own, but failed to find any person named either Bouchier or Beaufort."

As these words were uttered, proving to him so plainly that the speaker was striving to deceive him by a barefaced falsehood, Captain Cool Blade frowned deeply, and one hand stole into his bosom until his fingers closed around the silver haft of a long and heavy bowie-knife. At that moment Amariah Colby stood closer to death's door than ever before in the course of his checkered life.

But then the furtive grasp was relaxed, and Captain Cool Blade gave the unconscious man a respite. There was still work for him to be doing while the darkness lasted. After that was accomplished—a cold, pitiless smile filled up the hiatus.

"Very well," he said in a low, smooth voice. "No doubt you are right, and the persons I was searching for are food for the fishes by this time. Let the matter rest for the present."

"You say that Dean Ashley was here this week? How long since he left?"

"This afternoon," was the nervous response.

"Then of course the boys have not yet left their old quarters. You will make all possible haste to

the rendezvous, and tell Ashley that there is work for him and the boys. Bid him come here as quickly as possible, but to keep out of sight. Let him give the old signal—the cry of the screech-owl, twice repeated, with an interval between—and I will meet him. Go, now, and don't let the grass grow under your feet. You should—must—have them here inside of two hours."

Despite the peremptory conclusion of this chapter of instructions, Amariah Colby hesitated, like one who desired to say or ask something while fearing to speak out. Captain Cool Blade noticed this vacillation on the part of his emissary, and sharply demanded:

"Well, what are you waiting for? Take care, old man! I'm not in the mood for nonsense. If you have any thing to say, out with it in one mouthful; if not, get you gone at once!"

Colby muttered a few inarticulate words, then turned and strode swiftly away amid the shadows. Captain Cool Blade stared after him with a dark frown, and his suspicions were unconsciously breathed aloud.

"He dare not attempt to play me false—and yet—it looks like it! The woman is in his own house—and his actions are so strange. But if he is meditating treachery, he had better take his last leave of all he loves upon earth, for by the knife of Abraham! I'll kill him!"

The sound of his own voice caused Captain Cool Blade to leave his threat unfinished. Yet the vow was none the less registered. The life of Amariah Colby hung suspended by a very frail thread.

The swamp magnate was no traitor, for all appearances and his own confused, agitated manner were against him. He stood in too great dread of Captain Cool Blade to ever deliberately betray or plot against him.

He was not ignorant of the strong affection—almost passionate love—which the gambler entertained for Dean Ashley. Though he had no proofs of the fact, he firmly believed that the two were father and son. He had stood by and seen the youth most soundly thrashed, without raising a finger to help him. He believed that Ashley had been seriously injured in his fight with Abner Clark, and he dreaded the anger of Captain Cool Blade when he should learn the truth.

This is what he tried to tell his master, but failed through lack of courage, and this was the sole cause of his strange perturbation. Nor had his report of a failure to find the parties he had been sent in quest of, been intentionally false. He did his work in good faith, and when he entered his own house on that errand, the woman whom Captain Cool Blade discovered and recognized a few minutes later, was at that moment being lifted from Abner Clark's skiff in the strong arms of the young farmer who had rescued her from a watery grave at the peril of his own life after all the others had abandoned the search.

Fearful that his labor had been in vain, for the woman had not moved a limb or uttered a sound since he placed her in the boat, Abner hastened to place her under the tender care of Dorinda, entering the house only a few moments after Amariah left it to complete his search. He had just deposited his dripping and insensible burden upon the lounge when Captain Cool Blade peered in upon them through the open window.

Had Captain Cool Blade only known all this, he would have been spared much hard feeling and positive anxiety of mind. Until this night, he had never been given the slightest cause for suspecting the fidelity of Colby, whom he regarded as true as steel to the interests of the Family. And being thus trusted, none of the secrets of the League had been concealed from him. Were he to prove false, he could work the League enormous harm, unless his tongue was silenced by the finger of death.

With a powerful effort Captain Cool Blade cast aside his haunting suspicions, and prepared himself for the work he had already laid out to be done before his men could arrive. There was more to be accomplished than he had at first estimated. Since—as he believed—Amariah Colby had attempted to deceive him in the matter of the woman in his house, it was possible that he had done the same with regard to the search among the men who were gathered around the fire.

It has been mentioned that Captain Cool Blade was in ignorance of the fact that Jacques Bouchier was Jules Beaufort, the faithless member of the League who was in correspondence with the enemy. Though he was the head of the Southern division of the wide-spreading organization, it chanced that he had never met with Beaufort in person, until aboard the War Eagle. He had come well recommended by several trusted members of the Family, and so had been admitted. This will serve to explain why Captain Cool Blade was in ignorance of the fact that the traitor had already been punished.

He threw aside his long-skirted, tight-fitting black coat, lest it should lead to his recognition, and bound a handkerchief around his head and part of his face, as though he had been injured in the explosion, then gradually drew nearer the crowd around the fire. This had been built a few rods from the river bank, beneath several large trees. If the parties who kindled it had been interested in the success of the little drama which was soon to be performed, they could not have chosen a more convenient stage.

The appearance of the disguised gambler excited no remark. Full half of the men were gloomily brooding over the loss of their dear ones, while the rest, who were more fortunate in that one respect, having no one to care for save themselves, could think of nothing else save the terrible tragedy and their own narrow escape from death.

Though he knew that he was running the risk of discovery and recognition, Captain Cool Blade soon found out that there was no man present by the name of Beaufort, through cautiously put questions. All seemed to agree that Jules Beaufort had gone down with the boat.

Then, for the first time, the gambler discovered that his bullets had not proved fatal, but not a changing muscle told how strong was his agitation when the planters, their current of thought turned by the questions, unconsciously revealed the truth he had never suspected—that Jacques Bouchier was none other than Jules Beaufort!

From this they went on to talk about Captain Cool Blade, little dreaming that their every word

was heard by that worthy, who, fearful of betraying himself by his excitement over the strange discovery, had withdrawn a little from the firelight.

He learned much about himself then that he had never even suspected before. If one-half of the stories were true that were told around the crackling fire, then he must have been a fiend incarnate.

Seated in the shadows cast by one of the great trees, the subject of all this talk took out a notebook and pencil, writing down the name of each man who added his mite to the wonderful biography, and opposite each name he set a number, greater or less as he deemed wise.

A cynical smile curled his lips as he worked on, making a mental note of each atrocity related. He sat quietly until he had written down the names of an even dozen men, adding descriptions of two others who were personal strangers to him. Then he arose and stealthily glided still further away from the firelight, muttering softly:

"Fools! poor, pitiful fools! if you could only know what trouble your nimble tongues are brewing for you, you would have bitten them off for very spite rather than suffer them to utter those words! You laugh now, but my turn will come next—and soon! Ha! can it be possible?" he breathed sharply as a shrill, unearthly sound came from the darkness beyond.

He recognized the cry as that made by the diminutive screech-owl—the signal by which Dean Ashley was to announce his coming. And he breathlessly listened for a repetition of the sound.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRESH ALLY.

WITH bated breath Captain Cool Blade listened for the expected repetition of the signal cry, even while he wondered at the extraordinarily fast time Amariah Colby must have made to have returned with his men so soon. The cry was repeated ere long, but this time it came from the tree-top above his head, and beyond all doubt was uttered by a genuine screech-owl.

"I should have known better," the captain muttered in a tone of self-reproof. "Colby has barely had time to reach the rendezvous, and it will take nearly as long for the boys to reach this spot. An hour longer, at the very least."

Barring his natural anxiety lest the arrival of a steamboat from either up or down the river, which would assuredly be induced to land by the signals of the wrecked party, should interfere with his deep-laid plans before they could be carried out, Captain Cool Blade would have cared but little whether his men arrived before the small hours or not. There was one point that troubled him not a little.

The better to play the part assigned him, Amariah Colby had assumed the role of a religious man, and all the men he employed bore a good character in general, not one of them having the slightest connection with the Family. By his means, though the tongue of rumor had begun to taint the good name of the swamp magnate, he had escaped any positive suspicion.

These employees, eight in number, had been so excited and thoroughly worked up by the thrilling events of the evening, that they were one and all as wide awake as if they knew not the meaning of the word sleep. They did not mingle with the party of planters, however, but were gathered around a small fire near the saw-mill, eagerly conversing together over the explosion and rescue. The big alligator-hunter was one of the number.

Captain Cool Blade knew that these honest fellows would be likely to give him trouble in the carrying out of his plans, unless he could manage to dispose of them in some manner.

His brain was a fertile one, and a plausible scheme was not long in being concocted. But he needed aid in carrying it out. He was sure of a trusty ally, in the wife of Amariah Colby, if he could only obtain a private interview with her. And this he set about securing at once.

He hastened along until at a point from whence he could once more look in at the open window of Colby's house. His blood thrilled strangely as he saw the face that had so deeply interested him on a prior occasion. The woman was still lying upon the lounge, but her eyes were open, and she appeared to be in full possession of her natural senses.

Fortune favored him still further as he moved slowly along in order to scan the interior of the room as fully as possible, for he saw that there was only one other person in the apartment—and that was a woman, none other than Mrs. Colby.

His eagerness to improve the golden opportunity did not cause him to forget his prudence, and though he rapidly approached the window, he kept as much as possible in the shadow. Pausing when only a few feet distant, he thrust a bended finger into his mouth and made a peculiar hissing sound which he believed would answer his purpose.

His glowing gaze was fixed upon the form of the woman within. Though gaunt and angular, with harsh and strongly-marked features, his iron-gray hair looking as though it had been a stranger to either comb or brush for a week past, an angel of light could not have given more perfect satisfaction to the plotting gambler than did Mrs. Amariah Colby as she slowly turned her hard-featured countenance toward the open window. For he knew that she had caught and understood the signal. Her nerves were good, for not the faintest start accompanied the movement, nor was there any trace of emotion allowed to show itself through the blank, stolid mask which she could and did assume at will.

Reason told her that the signal could only have come through the window, and her gaze was now keenly bent in that direction as she, with careless composure, moved forward a step or two, thus rendering it impossible for the woman upon the lounge to see the window or anything that might pass before it.

Captain Cool Blade allowed nothing to escape him, and seeing his chance, stepped close up to the window, making a swift sign with one hand while with the other he momentarily lifted the bandage from his face. A slight, barely perceptible nod from the iron-nerved woman told him that he was recognized, and making a peremptory beckoning motion to indicate his wish for a private interview, the gambler drew back into the darkness once

more. Another short inclination of the grizzled head gave him to understand that his wish would be gratified.

He was not kept long in waiting, and Amariah Colby suffered in the comparison which Captain Cool Blade mentally drew between him and his wife. Of the twain, she would have made by far the better man.

"Follow—where there is no risk of our words being overheard," he muttered, as the woman stood before him a few moments later.

She obeyed in silence, apparently incapable of feeling surprise at anything he might say or do.

He led the way around to the rear of the house, pausing midway between that and the small barn. Here the gloom was such that it was far from likely they would be observed by any outsider, while the nature of the ground was such that no one could draw near to them without their approach being noticed in time to avoid all danger.

"We can talk here in perfect safety," began Captain Cool Blade. "Mark my words well, for there is no time to waste in useless repetition. You have some laudanum in the house?"

The woman nodded abruptly by way of answer.

"Good! you will get it and give it to me. You have the key to the grocery?"

"No; Amariah carries that," tersely.

"Have you any liquor in the house, then?"

Again the woman shook her head, this time negatively.

"There was a little, but it was all used up on or given to the injured strangers."

Captain Cool Blade gave vent to an impatient oath.

"I know a way to get into the store without a key, if there is any real necessity for so doing."

"Why the devil didn't you say so before, then?" angrily.

"Because you only asked about the key," was the cool response, and the woman laughed softly.

"There is no time to waste in nonsense, I tell you once more. Go get the laudanum, and give it to me. Then fill a gallon jug with whisky, as speedily as you can. Lively!"

"Not until I understand a little more clearly what game you are up to, captain," was the quiet but resolute response. "Or go find my husband. If he is satisfied to do what you ask, I have nothing more to say."

"He is doing his share of the work now," said the captain, smothering his impatience as well as he was able. "I have sent him after the boys. This night's work will bring us all in a pretty penny, unless you spoil all by your cursed obstinacy."

"Fair words, captain. A woman is like a pig in one respect: you may coax, but you can't drive her, against her will. I will not go blindfold into any crooked work. I must see my way clearly."

The very quietness with which the woman spoke told Captain Cool Blade that he must humor her if he expected to obtain her aid. He was wise enough to accept the situation.

"Listen, then, and don't make me waste any more time. I am one of the passengers who was rescued from a watery grave by those noble fellows over by the saw-mill. I have a warm heart, and, though I lost nearly all my money when the War Eagle exploded, I wish to prove to them that I am not altogether ungrateful for the service they rendered me, among others. I have just money enough to buy a gallon of whisky. I do so, and entreat them to drink my health."

"You mean to poison them?" interrupted the woman.

"By no means—only to put them to sleep so that they may not interfere with our work."

"What work—tell me all, or I won't lift a finger to aid you," uttered Mrs. Colby, positively.

Captain Cool Blade drew closer to her, and stifling the strong temptation he felt to catch her by the throat and shake the obstinacy out of her, he hurriedly whispered a few sentences into her ear. Whatever the nature of this communication, it appeared to remove all doubts from the woman's mind, and she agreed to do what he required.

"Only I must be able to show that my hands are clear, when the trick is discovered. I will get you the laudanum, and then send Parker after the whisky. You must manage somehow to mix in the drug yourself. Or stay! I will empty the laudanum into the jug myself—there is one in the house—and then there can be no suspicion."

This was deemed the wisest plan, and Captain Cool Blade bade the woman make all haste. Her feminine curiosity satisfied, she made no further delay, soon emerging from the house with a gallon jug in her hand, and calling aloud to Parker, bade him fill the jug with whisky.

"This gentleman has paid me for it," she added.

"And I hope you will help me do justice to the liquor," cordially said the disguised gambler, as they proceeded toward the store. "It's little I am able to do to prove my gratitude to you and your mates for saving my life, but the time may come when I can show you that I am not an ingrate."

The jug was soon filled, and allowing Parker to retain possession of it, Captain Cool Blade led the way to the fire near the saw-mill.

"Gentlemen," he said, speaking in the high treble which he had assumed while addressing Parker, "I only wish I could thank you as you deserve, for all you have done this evening, but the good lady of the house yonder has kindly given me your names, and I will communicate with you as soon as I can reach home. Unluckily I lost all of my money with my baggage, except enough change to pay for this jug and its contents. I hope and beg that you will one and all join with me in drinking to our better acquaintance."

This affable speech was well received by all save the one whom Captain Cool Blade most desired to impress favorably. Big Jim Adams eyed the disguised gambler keenly, with a vague suspicion of something wrong, though what that something was, he could not even conjecture.

"After you is manners," he muttered, as the one uncovered eye of the gambler rested upon his face. Captain Cool Blade stretched out his hand for the jug with a pleasant laugh.

"I am never backward in coming forward on such an occasion. Your healths, gentlemen! May you live a thousand years, and never commit a worse crime than you have this evening, in risking your lives to save those of others—myself among the

number. May Heaven reward you as you so richly deserve!"

He tilted the jug across his arm and to all appearance drank heartily. This, with the earnest manner in which he spoke, disarmed the suspicions of even Jim Adams, and the jug was passed around the circle, each man doing ample justice to the toast of the disguised gambler.

Not once but thrice the jug made its circuit, and only paused then because it was emptied.

Mrs. Colby had not stinted the dose of laudanum, and the drug speedily took effect. The gambler was the first to yield, the alligator-hunter the last, but in less than half an hour from first tasting the liquor, he was soundly sleeping.

No sooner was Captain Cool Blade convinced of this fact, than he cautiously arose to his feet and left the circle of firelight, triumph written upon his features. So far his plans had worked admirably; if the rest would do—

At that moment the cry of the screech-owl came to his ears.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BEAUTIFUL AMAZON.

A low, vindictive laugh parted the lips of Captain Cool Blade, as, after a few moments of breathless listening, the cry of the screech-owl was repeated, from the same location. He knew, without waiting for the second repetition, that the sound found birth in no feathered throat, admirable as the imitation was.

"Good! the worst part of the work is done," he muttered, with a final glance toward the drugged men. "Those dullards will not wake of their own accord before noon to-morrow. There's nothing more to be feared from them—and I for one will not wear mourning if Mother Colby's soothing syrup proves strong enough to keep their eyes closed until the crack of doom. That infernal alligator-hunter has been growing far too inquisitive for his own good. For little I'd—"

The sentence died away in an ugly mutter, as the gambler frowned upon the unconscious giant. The third cry of the night-bird warned Captain Cool Blade that time was passing fast, and that he had more important business on hand than anathematizing Big Jim Adams.

He knew that a certain amount of time must be consumed in carrying out the bold plan he had formed, and was also aware that a steamboat might make its appearance at almost any moment, which would almost assuredly be fatal to his hopes.

Passing rapidly along he soon reached the line of timber and undergrowth from whence the signal cry had emanated, only pausing to utter a low, guarded whistle. He was speedily confronted by a slender, lithe figure, whom he at first mistook for Dean Ashley, in the baffling shadows.

"You are here in good time, Dean. There's big pay in this night's work—"

A soft, musical voice interrupted him.

"Dean was unable to come, Henry, but I am here to take his place. Give me your orders, and they shall be carried out to the very letter, never fear."

Captain Cool Blade breathed an oath of mingled vexation and surprise. It was plain to be seen that he was not pleased at the substitution, though his voice was strangely soft and tender as he at length made a reply:

"It is you, Hortense? You should not have come, though, of course I am glad to see you—or would be under any other circumstances. Where is Dean—and what has happened to him? Nothing serious, I hope?" and there was a cadence of genuine anxiety in the man's voice as he spoke.

"More shame and humiliation than ought else, I dare say," was the prompt and slightly contemptuous reply. "He came back from this place, last evening, in a sorry pickle. He would tell me nothing, but Amariah Colby told me all as we came along—and begged me to avert your displeasure from him, though I don't see how he was to blame."

"Come to the point!" impatiently uttered Captain Cool Blade. "What happened? who hurt him?"

"He had a fist-fight with young Clark, I believe, and was soundly thrashed. A quarrel over Colby's daughter, if I understood the old man aright. He is not much hurt. A week, and he will be as sound as ever, I have no doubt. Still, he was in a high fever, and unable to answer your call. Colby said it was urgent, and so I led the men here."

"You should have left it with Stephens—"

"He was away—and all but six of the men were with him," was the prompt response.

A fierce imprecation escaped the adventurer.

"Then we are dished! six men against twenty! What the devil took Stephens off at this moment, of all others? Who gave him permission?"

"I suppose he thought none was necessary. You left him in command, under Ashley. Dean was never at his post. His time was all spent here, running after Dorinda Colby. Word came from up country of a good stroke in our line, and Stephens was not the man to let the opportunity pass unimproved. You cannot blame him, in justice, since he was working for the good of all."

"No—and yet his services here, to-night, would be worth fifty times what he will earn on his entire trip. A richer haul—a finer plan—by the rod of Moses! it's enough to make a man curse the devil that puts such a glorious chance before his eyes, only to deny him the privilege of improving it!" growled Captain Cool Blade, grating his teeth and breathing heavily.

"We have six good men; you and I make eight, not counting in Colby, who will be equal to at least two, in his desire to propitiate you. It must be an unusually heavy piece of work that we cannot manage," quietly uttered Hortense.

It was no idle boast, her counting herself among and the equal of stout men. The past had proven that beyond the possibility of a doubt.

She was a creole, and once, not many years ago, had been one of the reigning belles and the most popular toast of the Crescent City. Her parents were very wealthy, and highly connected, proud of their ancestors and haughty to a degree. Hortense was an only child, and pampered as only such parents can pet and indulge a favorite daughter. Nothing was too good or costly for her, and thousands were gladly spent to gratify any whim she might form. But the time came when they were forced, by their pride and almost idolatrous love for Hor-

tense, to cross the first ardent, genuine longing she had ever experienced. That was her mad love for the dashing adventurer whom the public knew only as Captain Cool Blade.

It was a case of love at first sight with them both. To do the gambler justice, he never once gave her prospective riches a thought. For the first—despite his former marriage—and last time in his life he realized what it was to love with his entire soul and being. And so it was with the passionate creole. She knew that he was a man who lived by his wits—who was a professional gambler, and generally believed to be even worse than that—but that made no difference in her feelings. She loved, and was beloved in turn. That was enough—until her alarmed parents attempted to reason her out of her mad fancy, and even went so far as to place her in temporary confinement.

That same night she escaped from her chamber, through the window, and sought out Captain Cool Blade. She found him at the gambling tables, and unheeding the amazement of the spectators, many of whom knew her by sight, a few even more intimately, she drew the adventurer aside and told him all. Nor were her words wasted upon one who was unable to appreciate the enormous sacrifice she was making. The great majority of men would have hesitated, have been confused by such a responsibility thrust upon them so unexpectedly, but not so Captain Cool Blade.

He drew her hand through his arm and led her down-stairs and out into the open air. Entering a carriage, they were driven to the house of a minister, and there made man and wife.

The stormy days which followed, can find no record here. Enough that the half-crazed parents and other relatives did all they could to take Hortense from her husband, but they failed. There were several street encounters, in which the usual good fortune of the gambler stood by him, and once he would have been assassinated as he entered his hotel with Hortense, only for her devotion and steady hand. She received the knife that was meant for his heart, in her own arm, and the next instant shot the assassin dead, though he was her own cousin.

More than once since then she had stood between him and almost certain death, and at other times lent him her aid in carrying out his bold and daring schemes.

Unlike the generality of his class, Captain Cool Blade was not fickle, and it was well for him that such was the case. There had always been a spice of the tiress in the young creole's composition, and this had strengthened with the wild, exciting life she led since they joined their fortunes. Her love was too fiery to be shared with another, and great as was her passion for him, Captain Cool Blade knew that she would drive her dagger through his heart without flinching, if ever he gave her cause to suspect his fidelity. This he had never done, never would do. His love for her was almost the only redeeming trait of his character, and it seemed to grow stronger, purer, with each passing day.

Though greatly annoyed by this unlooked-for weakness in the force he had sent for, Captain Cool Blade was not one to lightly abandon a project once formed. He stood for a few moments in deep thought, then flung back his head with an air of resolute decision that Hortense readily interpreted.

"The stake is too big for me to throw up my hand, even if it is less strong than I calculated," he said, with a short, sharp laugh. "We'll try if a little bold bluffing won't carry off the pot. Where are the boys?"

"A few rods over yonder. Come," said Hortense. He followed her lead and was quickly among the men. Though Stephens had culled the best of the lot, the captain knew that he could trust those before him, and he began to feel more confident of success.

In a few, well-chosen words he told them the nature of the work on hand, adding:

"It looks harder than it really is, and if we all play our parts well, there will be little or no trouble. I don't suppose there is a pistol among the fellows over yonder that would explode, even if they were to be tried, which is by no means likely, if you all play your part well. The pay will be more than worth the risk. I will guarantee each one of you five hundred dollars for your share of the work, and it may amount to ten times as much.

"Listen, now, and make sure that you fully understand what is required of you.

"You are to creep up as near the edge of the fire-light as you can, without being discovered. You must remove your boots. When I call upon you the one whom I am facing most nearly, will answer by a short whistle, then move around the circle as silently as possible, in the same way in which I turn, uttering a whistle at every step, until he reaches the next man, who will pursue the same tactics until the signal has passed entirely around. If you are careful, and do your work well, those fine fellows over yonder will believe that they are surrounded by full fifty men.

"Colby will get a coil of small rope and cut it up in pieces about three feet long. Brown and James will take charge of these, and after the round has been made will hold themselves in readiness to use them as the occasion may require.

"This is all I need say at present, for much will have to depend upon circumstances. Colby, you can procure the rope."

The man addressed gave an eager assent, and at once started off toward the store, while the other men began removing their boots and looking to their weapons with all the deliberation of men who were well used to such events. Hortense gently touched the captain on the shoulder, and as he turned toward her, signed for him to follow her.

"Your plan is a good one, save in one respect," she said, as soon as they were beyond earshot of the men. "Some one among these planters would certainly recognize you, and make you trouble hereafter. They would one and all join together in hunting you down, and show you no mercy."

"I know; that was why I was provoked when I found you in place of Ashley. I meant that he should play the part I am forced to take now. It over, he could keep shady until the worst of the storm blew over, which I cannot do. There are complications forming in the family that I alone

can arrange satisfactorily, and to do so, I must work night and day. It is unfortunate, but it cannot be helped. I must run the risk."

"No, you need not—you shall not, while I am here to take your place," earnestly cried Hortense. "I can do the work required as well as Dean Ashley could. Nay, I will hear no remonstrance, Henry. You owe a duty to the family that you must pay. In order to do it, you must be free and unincumbered. To face those men openly, would be ruin to your plans. You must let me take your place."

"If I believed there would be any danger—"

"There will not be; and even if any should threaten, would you not be close at hand to prevent it? Let me have my own way in this, Henry," she added, coaxingly. "Believe me it is all for the best."

The captain said no more. He saw that Hortense was resolved on carrying her point, and time was too valuable to be wasted. In a few words he communicated the change to the men, and accompanied them to the scene of their future action.

Having placed them to his liking, unsuspected by any of the planters who were seated around the fire, he returned to where Hortense was awaiting him.

He found her with a close-fitting mask of black velvet over her face. This she lifted long enough to press her lips to his for a moment, then said:

"Go now. I feel quite safe, so long as you are standing guard over me."

He bore her company to near the circle of light, then they parted. With a light, springy step she glided forward and stood revealed in the fire-glow, crying:

"Good-evening, gentlemen! I hope I don't intrude!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DECIDEDLY COOL PROCEEDING.

THE salutation was all very well, and taken by themselves, no possible objections could have been attached to the words. But when spoken through a narrow slit in a black mask, by—to all seeming—a young man who held in each hand a cocked and leveled revolver, the muzzles of which were gradually shifted until each man around the fire found himself covered in turn, then the softly polite salutation became a ghastly mockery.

Never were men taken more thoroughly by surprise, and for a few moments they stared in open-mouthed amazement at the speaker. It might be only a joke, but if so it was a very foolish and untimely one. Yet—he did not have the appearance of one who was carrying out an idle jest.

A soft felt hat was upon the bold intruder's head, the broad brim pushed up and back from his brow—for that the seeming man was in reality a woman, not one of the planters even suspected. Jetty black ringlets fell to the shoulder and over the collar of a black cloak which, confined at the throat while its folds were cast back beyond the extended arms, in a degree prevented the actual outline of the intruder from being noted. Black from crown to sole, save for the small hands and throat that shone in dazzling contrast.

This much the startled planters saw, but they were not given time to make any closer scrutiny. Clear and sharp as the notes of a bell the black mask spoke again:

"You are rather backward in responding to my salutation, gentlemen, but I am quite willing to dispense with ceremony. As a prelude, let me tell you that I never miss my aim, or waste two bullets on one target—that I hold the lives of one-half your number at my finger-ends—and that the man who attempts to draw a weapon or arise from his seat without first obtaining my permission, will die with his boots on, or there's no virtue in powder and lead."

"Drop that nonsense," sternly cried one of the planters, but despite the manner of his speech, he made no effort to arise or move a hand toward a weapon. "We are not in the humor for any such foolish mummery, just now."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Walter Campbell, for then you will not be so difficult to convince that I mean pure business. But let us start right."

"You are surrounded by more than two score men, who are lying just beyond the circle of light cast out by your fire. Every man of you is covered by at least one revolver. A single word from my lips—one gesture with my hand or a nod of my head in command, would be your death-signal. Does this sound like an idle jest? Listen!"

As she uttered these words, Hortense gave the signal formerly agreed upon, and from directly in front of her, a short, sharp whistle came from out of the darkness, taken up a pace to the left, and repeated until the echo ran completely around the circle. And so admirably were the precautions observed that not one among the party of planters even suspected that each whistle did not represent a separate and distinct enemy.

"I have given you this proof, gentlemen, of the correctness of my words, not by way of an idle threat, but simply to convince you that you are wholly in my power. I know there are some brave men among you, and I should deeply regret being obliged to utter their death-warrant. The worst use you can put a man to is to kill him, and then it makes such a disagreeable mess!"

"You are wonderfully considerate, Mr.—"

"You may call me the gentleman in black, for lack of a more distinctive title," laughed Hortense.

"A blood relation of his, I have no doubt," retorted Campbell, the man who fitted the noose around the throat of Captain Cool Blade, some ten hours previously. "What the foul fiend do you want, anyhow?"

"Blunt and to the point!" laughed the black mask. "To be equally plain, I want money. I am a special tax-gatherer, and am making my rounds."

"You are wasting your time on a fool's errand, then. Our money went down with the War Eagle. Go collect it from the fishes!"

"Many thanks, but I prefer following a drier course than that. Have patience, and I will show you how we can draw blood out of a turnip."

Hortense uttered a sharp whistle, and Brown and James, the two men designated by Captain Cool Blade for that duty, advanced toward her.

"Remember, gentlemen, and you, Mr. Campbell, in particular, the warning I gave you. If you are sensible and quietly submit to the inevitable, you

will not be harmed nor ill treated in the slightest degree. But true as there is heat in that fire! any attempt at resistance on your part, will result in your instant death. I am in deadly earnest. I have set out to accomplish a certain object, and accomplish it I will, even at the cost of twenty lives. This warning is uttered solely for your own good. Neglect it, and the consequences must rest on your head.

"Walter Campbell, your name stands first upon my list of delinquent tax-payers. Bearing my warning in mind, and remembering that the faintest stubbornness upon your part will result in a bullet through your brain, you will please advance and surrender yourself to my two deputies, here."

The man addressed rose promptly to his feet. He could not doubt the earnestness with which the black mask had spoken. Though as brave a man as ever lived, he was not reckless enough to throw away his life without seeing a chance of striking a return blow.

"If I submit, sir blackamoor, it is only that I hope to live long enough to hold another interview with you," he said, coolly, as he passed over to where the two outlaws stood.

"May your wish be gratified—when my funds have again run low," with a taunting laugh. "Take him away, but treat him respectfully. If a delinquent, he is still a bold one."

Brown and James each took an arm of the unresisting planter, and marched him away from the fire into the gloom beyond.

Captain Cool Blade had been anxiously watching the progress of the little drama he had improvised, his revolver cocked and held in readiness for instant use in case any danger should threaten his wife. His chief cause of doubt was this same Walter Campbell. He knew that the planter was absolutely devoid of personal fear, cool and quickwitted, a dangerous adversary for any man. He hardly dared hope that his capture would be effected without bloodshed, and he could scarcely realize the fact when he saw Campbell yield himself so quietly to the grasp of the two outlaws.

He was still suspicious as he hastened around to the point where the lengths of rope had been left, and toward which the outlaws were leading their captive, and he summoned two more of his men to accompany him, giving them their orders in a low, hasty whisper.

They each secured a couple of the bits of rope, and when they were joined by Brown and Jones with Campbell, the former was bidden to return, while Jones and the two other men were to take care of the prisoner.

As it proved, these precautions were unnecessary, for Campbell made not the slightest resistance, but knowing the fearless character of the man so well, Captain Cool Blade thought it best to be on the safe side. He was playing an extremely hazardous game, considering the heavy odds there was against him, and none knew better than he how apt a small spark is to kindle a great fire—that if a single blow was struck by the enemy, bloodshed must certainly follow. In that case, the weakness of his force would be apt to be revealed, when, not only would his carefully formed plans be ruined, but only extraordinarily good luck could save him and his from death or captivity.

The three men hurried Walter Campbell into the line of timber where they had left their horses, and there two of them held him firmly, while the third bound him hand and foot with the pieces of rope brought along for that purpose. This accomplished to their liking, one of the trio squatted down beside the bound planter, with a gentle hint that at the first sound from his lips he would have to "chaw lead," while the other twain hastened back to the fire.

Hortense was taking matters coolly while the outlaws were occupied with Walter Campbell. Though not knowing at what minute their plans might be ruined by the sounds of an approaching steamboat, she knew that only one man could be secured at a time, as it was necessary several of the outlaws should be occupied in giving seemingly unintentional signs and evidences of their presence around the circle, lest the planters should suspect the truth and grow troublesome.

She had a ready flow of words, and recognizing several among the party, she amused herself and kept them in a state of wondering suspense by her more or less veiled hints at prominent events in their past career, until more than one of the planters half-doubted whether she was not actually the "gentleman in black." But after Campbell was secured, the work proceeded with more rapidity.

One by one the names upon the list prepared by Captain Cool Blade were read off, and the men who answered to them, led away in the darkness to be secured as the others had been. As those whom he deemed the most dangerous had been put down first, and the larger proportion of them being made prisoners without any disturbance or trouble, Captain Cool Blade gave Hortense a signal to hasten the end. This was done by sending out the captives guarded each by two men, as before, but instead of waiting for the return of the guards, another planter was sent out under charge of a second detail.

All went off smoothly until Hortense had called forth the twelve named men, leaving only two others upon the list, whom she readily recognized by the description which Captain Cool Blade had appended.

The first of these was a young man, tall, dark and handsome, who had been one of the foremost in the frustrated attempt to lynch the gambler aboard the War Eagle. From the first appearance of Hortense, he had been closely observing her. What conclusions he arrived at, can only be surmised.

Ignorant of his name, Hortense indicated him by the hat he wore, and requested him to arise and advance.

Such unbroken success had rendered her a little careless, and she did not notice the fact that as the young man slowly arose, one hand was slipped behind him. But Captain Cool Blade was never off his guard a moment, and the significant action did not escape his watchful eye.

The young man advanced several paces, then made a swift bound and alighted within arm's length of the startled woman, his intention doubtless being to hold her life as his ransom; but in this he was foiled.

The revolver of the captain rose to a level and

with a quick, steady aim, was discharged. Without a sound the man fell to the ground, shot through the brain!

CHAPTER XIX. SURROUNDED BY DEATH.

WHEN the ill-fated War Eagle ran upon the snag and burst her boiler, the lovers, Marie Beaufort and Percy Talfourd, were still upon the hurricane-deck. The latter could not bring himself to relinquish the hopes he had formed of a speedy union, and as they slowly paced arm in arm along the tarred and gravel-covered length, he plead his cause more ardently than at first. It was an unequal contest, for poor Marie had to do battle with her love and strong inclination to yield to the sweet persuasion of the being whom she loved above all things earthly, besides, but before she was reduced to the last extremity, the accident occurred, and the steamer was wrecked.

Thanks to their position, on deck and near the stern of the vessel at the moment of explosion, the young couple were almost the first ones thrown into the water, and thus wholly escaped the volumes of terrible steam that almost instantly flooded the entire wreck, adding one more horror to the sickening scene of death and devastation.

Taken completely by surprise, and cast headlong from such a height, the lovers were torn apart and struck the water separately, both sinking deep beneath the surface. In one sense this was fortunate, since they thus escaped any serious injury from the falling debris that pounded the muddy waters into spray.

Though a strong and practiced swimmer, Percy Talfourd was almost suffocated when he came to the surface of the water after that involuntary dive. He had struck the water almost flat upon his stomach, and the heavy shock nearly drove the breath of life out of his body. Only the instinctive knowledge that if he failed her, his loved one must die, kept him from succumbing at once to the horrible nausea that assailed him from that sickening shock.

Dashing the dripping hair from his eyes, he cast a wildly anxious glance around him. The stern of the War Eagle was just sinking—the forward half, weighted down by the engines and huge smokestacks had already disappeared beneath the surface. The river was strewn thickly with fragments of the wreck, with barrels, casks, bales of cotton and other portions of the boat's lading. Men, women and children were struggling desperately for their lives; but nowhere could the agonized lover distinguish the one who was all in all to him.

The gathering gloom was against him as he swam desperately to and fro, and more than once he was deceived by a fancied resemblance, only to turn aside and resume his killing search, with sickening despair compressing his heart more and more tightly with each moment of unavailing exertion.

But then he was rewarded. He heard a faint cry of terror, and instantly recognized the voice of Marie Beaufort, coming from the gloom directly ahead of him. He saw her form clinging to one end of a cotton-bale—saw that a man was striving to tear her hold away, in his insane terror not realizing that the support would be sufficient to save them both from drowning.

The young planter fairly shot through the water and reached the terror-stricken wretch just as he had succeeded in pushing the maiden away from the float. It was a fatal action for him. As Percy Talfourd realized what had occurred, his outstretched hand struck against and instinctively closed upon a short, heavy splinter of wood. Then, without pausing to utter a word or to calculate the consequence, he dealt the cowardly wretch a terrific blow over the head with the piece of timber, throwing all the power of his nervous arm into the blow. With a gasping, gurgling groan, the man flung up his arms and sunk beneath the surface.

Percy Talfourd did not pause to note the result of his avenging stroke, but looked eagerly around for his betrothed. He fancied he caught a glimpse of her uplifted arms as she disappeared amid the agitated waters, and with a wild cry he swam in that direction. His foot was brushed by some object as he trod water in order to glance around him, and turning nimbly over, he dove into the muddy depths.

Providence guided him, and his arms closed around a feminine form that he instinctively knew was that of Marie Beaufort. Quickly rising to the surface, the young planter raised the head of the maiden above water, but the eager look that told him he had found his loved one, also told him her senses had fled.

He had drawn heavily upon his powers, though in the water for but a comparatively brief time, and in addition he began to feel the effects of his fall from the hurricane-deck of the War Eagle.

He fought stoutly against his rapidly growing weakness and nausea, but it was fortunate for both himself and helpless burden that they had drifted but a few feet from the floating cotton-bale that had already cost one human life.

He managed to reach this, and with his handkerchief to fasten Marie to the ropes which crossed the top, by her hands. Then he passed around to the opposite side and kept the bale from being turned over by the dead weight of the maiden, and obtaining a much needed support for himself.

He felt himself rapidly weakening with a strange, deathly sickness, and instinctively thrust his left hand to the wrist under one of the ropes. Then his senses fled, and the lovers hung to the cotton-bale as it steadily and rapidly floated down the river, all unconscious of the fact that there were strong hands and bold hearts within call, ready to risk life for life. But they were unseen in the deepening gloom, though more than once the long oars of the swiftly moving skiffs almost cast drops of water from their blades upon those two upturned faces.

And then, as no answering sounds came to their oft-repeated shouts, the rescuers abandoned the search, and the lovers, both apparently dead, floated silently down with the swift current.

How long he remained in this state of unconsciousness, Percy Talfourd never knew, but he was not long in realizing all that had occurred, and the imminent peril of their situation after the first ray of dawning recollection penetrated the darkness that had enshrouded his brain.

He called aloud to Marie, but without any answer.

With a horrible fear in his heart, he tore his left hand from under the rope. It fell into the water as helpless as though petrified, but he heeded not that. He passed around the cotton-bale, and found that Marie Beaufort was still in the same position, suspended by her hands, but either dead or unconscious—he feared the former.

He straightened up her painfully drooping head, and hoping against hope, used every means in his power to restore her to life and sensibility. For what seemed an age, but was in reality only a few minutes, his utmost efforts were in vain. But then a faint, spasmodic sigh rewarded him, and a cry of joy, that was painful in its ecstasy, broke from his lips.

The sound of his voice more than anything else, dissipated the maiden's stupor, and ere long Percy made her comprehend what had happened.

"We must get out of the water as soon as possible," he added, making an important discovery even as he spoke. "The current has drifted us closer to the shore, and if you will be a brave little woman, and trust to me, we will soon be upon dry land again."

Though the surface of the water around them was black as ink, and the lovers could hardly distinguish the outlines of each other, though side by side, Talfourd could make out the line of treetops on the right bank of the stream, showing darkly against the less opaque sky beyond, wherever occurred a rift in the masses of storm-clouds.

The black line seemed almost overhead, and he knew that the river bank could be only a few rods distant, at most. There was a bend in the river, and the change of the current, which followed the deepest channel, had carried them thus near. But the blind attempt must be made at once, otherwise they would run the risk of being carried out into the middle of the stream again.

Marie uttered not a word of doubt or remonstrance, though she trembled like a leaf in every fiber as her lover released her hands and bade her hold firmly on the collar of his coat. She knew that he was doing all for the best, but it seemed to her like voluntary suicide to abandon the cotton-bale that had preserved their lives so long. But Percy Talfourd did not hesitate. Though feeling far from well or possessed of his usual strength, he struck out into the inky blackness, supporting his precious burden, swimming low and steadily in order to have a reserve of strength in case an unforeseen emergency should arise.

It was well that the distance was short, else, weighed down by his boots and clothes, the young planter would never have made the shore, still less have surmounted the difficulties that then confronted him.

The bank was unexpectedly high, and perpendicular as the wall of a house, while the current ran swiftly at its base. He failed to find a foothold, for the water was over his head, and once when his fingers closed upon a pendent root, the heavy strain upon it caused the unstable earth around it to crumble and fall all around them.

Fearful of being buried beneath the caving bank, Talfourd relaxed his grasp and allowed the root to slip through his fingers. For an instant he felt despairing, but then came a violent shock, and he found their rapid progress abruptly checked.

Like a drowning man grasping at the proverbial straw, he flung one arm around the obstacle against which the current had driven them, and a faint cry of thankfulness broke from his lips as he divined the truth. A huge tree had fallen partly into the water, its roots and the greater portion of its trunk remaining on land, while its top was firmly fixed in the river bottom.

A few words made Marie comprehend what was expected of her, and trusting wholly in the man she loved, she followed his directions without a word.

Placing her arm over his shoulders in such a manner as to leave his arms unhampered, the maiden was thus brought directly behind him. As he started to climb up the large limb, she was raised from the water upon his back. Thus, inch by inch he worked his way upward, nor was the feat quite so difficult as may be imagined, for, though a "dead-wood," the tree-trunk and branches still retained the rough bark, thus obviating the danger of slipping back.

Still, it was all that the young planter could do, nor was the mental strain less exhausting to the maiden. And when the land was at last reached, they both sunk down helpless, and lay in a stupor that closely resembled death, for many minutes.

They heard not the whistle of an approaching steamboat, an hour later, nor did they stir as the boat passed them by, her crew all afoot, her huge firecrates making the surface of the river clear as the noonday sun.

Again that whistle, and Talfourd roused up, all too late! The boat had passed them by, and though he shouted aloud at the top of his voice, only the heavy puffing of the 'scape-pipe answered him back.

CHAPTER XX.

MOST TENDERLY FLEECE.

DEATH, sudden and all unexpected, is awesome to even those most hardened by a wild and reckless course of living, nor was the present case an exception to the general rule. Had the dark-faced stranger succeeded in his bold, reckless attempt, there is little doubt but what the spell would have been broken, and the tables quickly turned upon the outlaws by the planters. But when the pistol exploded from out the darkness, and the young man fell to the ground a lifeless corpse, a few drops of black blood distilling from the small round hole in his forehead, the planters moved not a limb unless it might be in trembling, lest the same dread and speedy doom should overtake them. The one stern lesson proved all-sufficient.

Hortense alone seemed wholly unmoved by the tragedy, though she knew that she had escaped death as by a miracle. Instead, a low, pleasant laugh parted her lips, and she uttered:

"He was a bold fellow, but a fool, for all that. Had he paid heed to my warning, he would still be alive, instead of a senseless bit of carrion. You can take the warning unto yourselves, gentlemen. Be sensible and your lives are safe; but the next man who hesitates to obey my orders, or who dares to raise a hand against me or mine, shall share the fate of this headstrong fellow."

There was only one more man down upon her list,

and as she called to him, he arose and put himself under charge of the two outlaws without a moment's hesitation. Hortense smiled ironically as she noticed this alacrity, but made no remark.

A low whistle came from the darkness behind her, and she nodded her head in understanding. Captain Cool Blade was in a hurry to complete the task, and be off with his prizes before anything could interfere to spoil his plans.

"Gentlemen, as I mentioned at first, we are tax-gatherers, and have been simply performing our duty in bringing these delinquent tax-payers to book. I have arrested all whose names are put down in my list, though I doubt not that the great majority of you are equally guilty with those whom justice has at length overtaken. I don't blame you, either. It is no crime or disgrace to cheat the government out of its dues, unless you get caught in the act."

"But let that pass. As tax-payers you are free, for the present, but I have the honor to be the treasurer of the 'Magnanimous Society for Furnishing the Benighted Hottentots with Red Flannel Petticoats and Silver-plated Tooth-picks,' and on their behalf I make a piteous appeal, which I am quite sure you will not slight. All treasurers love a cheerful giver—and I am no exception to the general rule. Deacons Jones and Smithers will please pass around the plate, taking care to slight no person, but giving the generous brethren an opportunity to contribute their mite toward the glorious cause—ahem!"

Hortense was speaking against time, her object being to occupy the enemy's mind and keep them from thoughts that might be dangerous. But now she knew that all was in readiness for the second act of the little melodrama, and uttered the words that called forth two of the outlaws from the darkness.

"Remember, gentlemen," she said with a significant intonation that defied misinterpretation, "if any one in his eagerness to contribute to the cause of which I am the humble advocate, should create any disturbance or confusion, he will be called to order in the same manner as was your friend who lies at my feet. A word to the wise!"

The warning was an unnecessary waste of words, however. The planters had received a lesson they were not likely to forget in a hurry, and submitted to the ministrations of the rough outlaws as meekly as so many lambs. It was equally evident that the "deacons" had "passed around the hat" on more than one previous occasion, else they could never have attained their present proficiency. Each pounced upon a victim, and in an incredibly short space of time "went through" his clothes, handing the various articles when found to Hortense, and then, when their victims were thoroughly fleeced, forcing them to assume a recumbent position. Close upon their heels followed two other men, bearing lengths of small but stout rope, with which they bound the luckless fellows hand and foot, finally inserting a corn-cob between each pair of jaws, binding the unsavory gag in place with a handkerchief or other parts of the victim's own apparel.

Hortense secured the various sums of money found, together with the watches, rings and other articles of jewelry upon her own person, casting the weapons as far into the river as her arm could throw them.

At length the enforced contributions were all collected, and the men lay around the fire like the radiating spokes of a mighty wheel. Then Hortense addressed them with mocking politeness:

"A thousand thanks for your generosity, gentlemen! Your names shall be forever honored by and remembered in the prayers of scores of the benighted Hottentots whom your liberal donations will have made happy and comfortable. And your names shall be recorded in the columns of the Society's Organ as an example for all others to follow."

"Now, one parting word. We have taken these little precautions to save you from future trouble. If you lie here quietly until day-dawn, you shall be released from your bonds, without any further injury. But if you are contrary—if you attempt either to release yourselves or one another, or make the faintest outcry—that will be the signal for your death. There will be six men left on watch, with strict orders to shoot down the refractory—men who have no thought beyond the obeying my commands. Unless you are weary of life, you will do well to bear this warning in mind. Show yourselves true philosophers. Go to sleep and wait for rosy-fingered Aurora to give the signal for your freedom. Until our next meeting, gentlemen, farewell!"

In the meantime Captain Cool Blade had not been idle. Until he was convinced that the one stern lesson was quite sufficient to overawe the planters, he stood guard over his idolized wife, revolver in hand; but when he saw that this was a needless waste of time, he made his preparations for striking one more blow for revenge.

He silently passed around to where Amariah Colby was moodily watching the fleeing process, and touching him upon the shoulder, signed for the swamp magnate to follow him.

In fear and trembling Amariah Colby obeyed the will of the master whom he mortally feared. When at a safe distance and beyond the earshot of all others, Captain Cool Blade spoke:

"What was your reason for lying to me about that woman in your house, Colby? Are you tired of life? Have you forgotten your oath so soon?"

"If any one lied, it was not me, captain," replied Colby, the sharpness of the accusation lending him a momentary courage. "There was only one woman in my house, and she said her name was Heywood. I could find no one to answer to either Beaufort or Boucher."

"I followed after you within five minutes, and I saw with my own eyes the woman I speak of, Mrs. Jules Beaufort," sternly added the captain.

"Was she an old woman, with white hair?"

"No—not yet forty, and her hair as black as mine."

"Then I did not see her. She must have come there after I left," said Colby, positively. "Who was with her? Did you notice?"

"Your wife and a young man—"

"That must have been Abner Clark! You know he staid behind the rest. He must have found the woman you speak of, and carried her to my house directly after I left it," eagerly said Colby.

"It was Clark, now I come to think," responded Captain Cool Blade, beginning to believe that he

might have wrongly suspected his tool of treachery. "It is barely possible that it may have happened as you say, but when you acted so strangely—"

"That was because Dean Ashley got hurt, here, and I was afraid you would blame me for it, or rather for not preventing the fight," replied Amariah Colby, a little dubiously.

"If it was done in a fair fight, I have nothing to say about it. Ashley is old enough to hoe his own row. If he is fool enough to run after a girl whose hand is pledged to another, he must expect some trouble. But that was all that made you act so queer?"

"Upon my oath it was, captain," was the earnest reply.

"The more fool you, then! Remember, I only punish a man for a fault or crime willfully committed. So long as your own hands are clean, you can face me boldly and openly. But let that matter rest for the present. I have a little job for you, and if it is faithfully performed, I will acknowledge that I suspected you wrongfully."

"If it is not beyond the power of one man to do, you can depend upon me," was the reply, in a tone that told Captain Cool Blade the speaker meant even more than he said.

"Any child able to speak could do what is required of you. But first, let me tell you how important the business is. This woman's husband, Jules Beaufort, belonged to the Family, but yielded to temptation, and offered to sell our secrets and our lives, for a heavy reward and immunity for himself. I learned this, and followed him, picked a quarrel and shot him through the heart, as I firmly believed. But somehow he was not killed, and I was put ashore from the War Eagle before I found it out. Now the odds are that he was either killed by the explosion, or drowned afterward, seeing that he was not among the ones rescued and brought here, but he may have escaped. I happen to know that he idolizes his wife, and if she is once in our power, we will have a hold over him that will keep his tongue quiet until we can silence it still more effectually. You understand?"

"So far, yes," was the hesitating response.

"The rest is even more simple. You must go to Mrs. Beaufort, and tell her that some men from below have just come in, bearing her husband, who is dying; that he wishes to see her at once—"

"You can trust me, captain," interposed Colby.

"Tell me where I must bring her and I'll do it."

"Just get her outside of the door, and I'll attend to the rest. But do you lead the way, and bring a shawl or blanket with you. Hand that to me, and I'll answer for the rest," said Captain Cool Blade.

Amariah Colby, glad that the duty demanded of him was so easy of execution, lost no time, but hastened at once to his house. Captain Cool Blade followed close upon his heels, and took up his position near the side of the door.

He was not kept long in suspense. Amariah Colby quickly told his cunning story, and led the agonized woman into the trap set for her. Captain Cool Blade flung the blanket over her head, stifled her cries, and then bore her swiftly away in his arms.

CHAPTER XXI.

PERILS OF THE NIGHT.

THE loud shouting of her lover aroused Mary Beaufort from the half-sleep, half-stupor into which she had fallen when she felt the firm earth once more under her feet, and realized that they had fairly escaped from the terrible perils of the swiftly flowing river. She started to her feet with a cry of alarm that instantly brought Percy Talfourd to her side.

"There is nothing to be alarmed at, dearest," he said, one arm encircling her waist, and striving hard to choke down the chagrin he felt. "I am hailing the boat that has just passed us, but failed to make my voice heard. If I had roused up a little earlier, there might have been a chance."

"There—you shall not blame yourself without blaming me, also," and with poorly counterfeited playfulness, Marie pressed her hand upon his lips. "I slept—if sleep it was—longer than you did, while you it was that should be tired out. I was only an incumbrance, while you was forced to do the work of two."

Her further speech was cut short in a truly lover-like fashion, which should greatly raise Percy Talfourd in the estimation of my fair readers. A man who could think of such tender endearments after all he had gone through, horribly sick at the stomach, wet to the skin, in a musketo-infected wilderness, goodness knew how many miles from anywhere, without a weapon to defend himself, a match to kindle a fire, a bite to eat, a cigar or a pinch of tobacco to smoke—was one among a thousand, a lover among ten thousand.

But the young planter knew that neither kissing nor hugging would carry them out of the wilderness without the aid of more substantial efforts. He knew, too, that their lives were in positive peril so long as they remained in the swampy wilderness. He knew that poisonous serpents abounded, while wild beasts were by no means uncommon in those tangled recesses, at that day, nearly three decades ago.

These thoughts flashed through his mind with wonderful rapidity, and after a moment's consideration he concluded to place the situation fairly before Marie. He knew that there was true metal in her, and if not exactly a heroine, that she would show no foolish timidity when she once realized the nature of the work that lay before them.

"There is no use in fretting over the past and gone, my darling," he began, speaking far more philosophically than he felt. "That boat has passed beyond hearing, and another one may not come along for days, or if it does, we may miss it in much the same way. Granting this, it would be rank folly for us to remain idle here. We must work for our own salvation."

A paper heroine at this juncture would have bewailed the fact of his having been so foolish as to incumber himself with her, when he could so easily have allowed her to sink into a damp, watery grave, and would have implored him upon her bended knees to leave her to die alone, the more surely and easily to preserve his own life. But Marie Beaufort was no such dimly heroic phenomenon. Like a true woman, she clung to him still more closely, mutely yielding her will to his guidance.

"I don't know how far down the river we may have drifted," added Talfourd, feeling no disappointment in that his beloved acted like an everyday girl instead of the abnormal monstrosity so much in favor with the poet-suckers of the present age. "But I believe that we are nearer the settlements above than below. We were in sight of Colby's Landing when the War Eagle burst her boilers. We are on the opposite side of the river, unfortunately, but we can get across, no doubt, by hailing them for a boat."

"Then you think we had better try to make our way up the river-bank in the darkness?" asked the maiden, drawing still closer to him with an involuntary shudder, as though she felt a premonition of the deadly perils they were fated to encounter before another day-dawn.

"It will be hard work, and I am very sorry for your sake, darling," uttered Percy, with an osculatory punctuation. "But I know you are brave enough to look the situation fairly in the face. We are without food, or any means of procuring it. The longer we remain in this wilderness, the greater will be our peril. Doubtless there are bears and panthers in these brakes, to say nothing of snakes."

The young planter regretted having made this addition, as he felt Marie tremble upon his arm. But the harm was done, and he could not swallow his words, though he endeavored to soften them.

"Those are the risks we must run, and I thought it no more than right that you should understand the very worst. On the other hand, we might wander through these recesses without encountering anything more terrible than a lizard or a toad."

"Let us start at once," said Marie in a low voice. "If I could only be sure that poor mother and father had escaped with life, I could bear up so much better against whatever trials may be in store for me!"

And now Percy Talfourd told the truth while under the impression that he was telling a pious lie.

"I think there is little doubt, darling, but what we will meet them both in good time, alive and well. You know how near we were to Colby's Landing when the explosion took place. Even if the approach of the boat had not been noticed before, the people living there must have heard the explosion. They would not be human beings if they had lost a moment in putting off in boats to the rescue."

"Did they? you saw them, then?" eagerly demanded Marie, pausing in their toilsome tramp in fear lest she should lose a word of the answer.

"Yes," desperately responded her lover, resolved to balk at nothing, if only he could encourage the maiden thereby, "they put off in boats at once, and though I couldn't see them very clearly, I have no doubt that they rescued nearly all of the passengers, your mother and father among the rest."

"Then how did they happen to overlook us?" asked Marie doubtfully, because the picture he drew was almost too bright for belief, dearly though she wished it.

"You know it was rapidly growing dark," said Talfourd, secretly amazed at the facility with which the lies—as he believed—rolled off his tongue's end. "Then you were unconscious—"

"I was not much hurt until that dreadful man struck me on the temple and pushed me away from the cotton-bale I was instinctively clinging to. Then it all turned black to me, and I believed that I was dying!" with a nervous pressure upon his arm.

"I saw that," and Percy with difficulty swallowed a strong word that struggled to find utterance. "It was the cry you uttered then that guided me. I had been swimming all around in search of you."

"I can remember crying out, and then the water choked me as it closed over my head."

"I dove after you," said Talfourd, shuddering as he thought of how narrowly his loved one had escaped death. "You were insensible, but I made out to fasten you to the cotton-bale—"

"The same one the man pushed me from?"

"Yes. He sunk almost immediately after he struck you. I don't believe he ever rose again."

"It was a judgment upon him for his cowardly cruelty," the maiden uttered, solemnly.

"You are right—it was a judgment on him," and the darkness hid from view a grim smile. "But let him go. I fastened you to the cotton-bale, and swam around to the other side in order to keep it from being overturned by your lifeless weight. And in that way we floated on down the river."

"But if the boats came to the rescue, why didn't you call to the brave men? Surely they would not have deserted us?"

"That is what I would have done, but I had hardly time to slip my hand under one of the ropes before I lost all consciousness. You see I struck the water flat upon my stomach, and the heavy shock made me most fearfully sick. That, and the darkness will account for our being here. But we should be thankful that matters are no worse."

"If I only felt sure that they were saved."

"They were, almost certainly. In a few hours from this you will be laughing with them both over your idle fears," said Talfourd with outward cheerfulness.

For an hour or more he continued his efforts to banish the fears of the maiden, and by his persistency finally succeeded in doing so.

The task they had set themselves was a difficult one indeed, the more especially since they had to contend against almost utter darkness. A virgin forest where the soil is rich, is no easy task to traverse, even with the broad light of day to lessen the difficulties, and none are more difficult than the low bottom lands that skirt the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

For ages the dead trees have fallen one above another, and over their decaying bodies and limbs wild vines and brambles grow rankly, affording a congenial harbor for venomous serpents and lurking place for wild beasts. The soil is soft, and the leaf-mold deep. At times one sinks above the knees. Vines and creepers hang from overhead, and form an impenetrable wall between the tree-trunks. The undergrowth is thick and stubborn.

All these natural difficulties the lovers had to contend with. Though forced to make occasional slight detours, they knew the risk of wandering far from the river-bank, since that was their only sure guide. Nor would it do to venture too close to the verge.

A less experienced traveler than the young planter could have told that, for every few minutes they could hear the sullen splash as a portion of the undermined earth fell into the swirling waters, intensified now and then by the crackling roar and mighty concussion as some huge tree bore the caving bank company.

For a week past the river had been almost stationary, at its highest point, but for two days past it had been falling. During the rise and highest flood, the danger above noted is not nearly so great as it is when the flood is subsiding. Then the swiftly-flowing waters rapidly undermine the loose-lying dirt, and acre after acre is thus eaten away. One instance, which I can vouch for, will illustrate the point most clearly.

At daydawn a farm-house stood 307 yards from the river-bank. At noon the occupants began moving the building away from the rapidly encroaching river. At 3 o'clock, the house was floating down the river.

This occurred on the Kansas side of the Missouri river, and was an extreme case, but even along some portions of the Mississippi river the peril is great, as our friends realized all too soon.

They were then walking with difficulty along a few yards from the river-bank, when Percy felt the ground beneath his feet trembling and yielding. His first thought was of Marie, and he flung her away from him with all his strength, hoping to thus remove her from the caving portion. He had time for no more. There was a sudden downward rush, and he was precipitated into the water, an avalanche of earth and trees falling around him.

CHAPTER XXII.

COLLECTING THE TAXES.

THUS far the bold plans of Captain Cool Blade had worked to a charm, with the one trifling exception of the dark-faced man whom he had been obliged to shoot down without a moment's warning. The fat pigeons whom he had selected from the flock were ready to be plucked. Jacques Bouchier *alias* Jules Beaufort was almost certainly dead, while his wife was now lying half-smothered in the tight grasp of the bitterest enemy he or she ever had. Taking it all in all, the gambler felt that he had good grounds for feeling elated.

He had given his men their orders, and felt no anxiety about their being neglected. He knew just where he would find the prisoners with their guards, and apparently feeling the weight of Mrs. Beaufort as little as though she were an infant, Captain Cool Blade struck out direct for that spot, eager to wind up the little melodrama.

Dick Brown, in the absence of both Captain Cool Blade and Hortense, acted as master of ceremonies. He was no fool, and soon saw that it was going to be no easy job to conduct a dozen or more prisoners through the tangled cover in almost utter darkness. Of course their lower limbs must be unbound, since there were no spare horses. As soon as the prisoners began to realize how completely they had been duped, they would grow restless, and any sudden outbreak on their part could hardly help but result in the escape of some of their number.

But Dick was a bit of a genius in a small way, and though he knew nothing of the "blackbird trade," he resolved to fetter his captives in a somewhat similar way to the plan followed by the slave-dealers—which goes to prove that great minds often run in the same groove.

Making use of the extra coil of small rope which the provident swamp-magnate had furnished, the ingenious rascal tied loose knots in it at short intervals, one of which was put over the head of each captive, and drawn so as to fit the throat.

Dick chuckled with grim satisfaction as he saw how admirably his invention worked. Any unusual tension upon the rope would draw the loose loops tight, resulting in the severe choking not only of the refractory person, but of each and every one of his companions in misfortune as well.

"They's many a bigger fool thing then that idee bin tuck out a patent on," he grinned, as he explained the manner in which it worked to Hortense. "With thar hands tied, they can't none on 'em slip out thar heads, an' as I don't reckon ary one on 'em is ticklarly anxious to be choked, why each man 'll be a sort o' guard over all the rest. I could take the hull string from here to monkey-heaven, and never need a smitch o' help."

It was an ingenious idea, and Hortense acknowledged as much. She gave the word to slip the bonds from the feet of the prisoners, which was quickly done. Then she said to them:

"You have a little journey to make, gentlemen, but if you are patient, it will speedily be over. But only if you are quiet and tractable. If any man attempts to escape, or creates any disturbance along the road, his or their journey will end only in eternity. You understand me, boys? Shoot down whoever makes any effort to escape."

There was no occasion for a second warning. That one sudden death told them that they had fallen into the hands of men who would hesitate at no crime in order to gain their desired ends. So, although they could not help suspecting that they had been most scandalously deceived as to the number of the enemy, the prisoners marched along at the heels of Dick Brown in single file, making no protest or attempt to escape.

The journey was one that not a single link of the human chain ever forgot while life lasted. Bound like convicts, with an unpleasantly suggestive choking at every other step, since it was impossible for them to keep time in such darkness and over such a tangled trail, marching on to they knew not what doom; one such experience was more than enough for a lifetime.

Hortense, Brown and two others kept guard over the living chain, while the rest of the party brought on the horses. Amariah Colby remained at the Landing, on general duty.

It was nearly an hour after leaving the Landing when Hortense finally called a halt, having reached the point selected by Captain Cool Blade as the most convenient spot for carrying out the next act upon the programme.

"James, kindle a small fire as quickly as possible, near the base of this tree," she said, leaning against the trunk of the forest monarch indicated. "There shall be no excuse for mistakes on the score of light, at least."

There was an unwonted nervousness in her tone as she cast a swift glance around and slightly inclined her ear as if in listening. She was listening, and for Captain Cool Blade. She knew that he had other work on hand, but contrary to his usual custom, he had not confided to her its nature. Was it instinct that told her there was a woman mixed up in the case? Be that as it may, she was beginning to experience the pangs of a jealousy that, with but little to feed upon, would quickly become like a mountain torrent that had burst its barriers—a death-dealing avalanche, leaving naught in its path but ruin and desolation.

The outlaw named set briskly to work, but before the fire was fairly burning, a low whistle came to the ears of the beautiful Amazon, and knowing well from what lips it proceeded, she hastened in that direction, meeting Captain Cool Blade in a few moments. An icy hand seemed closing around her heart as she divined the nature of the burden he was bearing, and though she said nothing, the gambler readily interpreted her doubts.

"I will explain all to you when we have more spare time, Hortense," he said, rapidly. "Enough for the present that this woman is the wife of our bitterest foe, Jacques Bouchier, alias Jules Beaufort. Her case will keep, but you must finish with the others as quickly as possible. Here is pen and ink, and a blank check-book. The list I gave you will furnish all the information necessary. Go; the fire burns bright enough now for your purpose. As soon as I can fix this woman, I will come."

Her vaguely jealous fears removed, for she felt sure that the gambler would never lie to her, the beautiful Amazon took the articles named and retraced her steps to the fire, where the prisoners were, in no enviable condition of mind, awaiting the next act on the mysterious programme.

They were not kept long in suspense.

"Dick, you can relieve our friend, Mr. Campbell, of his patent necktie, and conduct him hither."

Brown, hugely enjoying his importance as master of ceremonies, enlarged the noose sufficiently for Campbell to withdraw his head, then marched the prisoner up to the fire where Hortense stood waiting.

"Mr. Campbell, understand me. You are a bold man, and as such I respect you. I should mightily hate to injure you, much less blow your brains out; but unless you submit gracefully to the inevitable, that is exactly what the end will be."

"Now you have sugar-coated your pill, come down to business. What is it you want of me?" the prisoner interposed, with sullen bluntness.

"Your signature to this little scrap of paper, nothing more," was the prompt reply; and while speaking, Hortense was rapidly filling out one of the blank forms in the book given her by Captain Cool Blade. "As before mentioned, I am collecting overdue taxes. The sum standing against your name is a mere trifle—only twenty thousand dollars."

"And you expect me to pay it? I'll see you in perdition first!" Campbell angrily exclaimed.

"Doubtless we will meet each other there in due course of time," was the cool response. "But you will get tired of waiting for me, if you refuse to sign this check. It is either that or death. James, cock your revolver and cover this gentleman while Dick unloosens his hands. If he makes any attempt to escape blow his brains out. Now, Mr. Campbell," she added, as the rope was removed, "I give you just twenty seconds in which to sign that check. At the end of that time, unless you have obeyed, I will put a bullet through your skull!"

No one who heard her speak could doubt the truth or earnestness of her threat, and as she began counting in a clear, sharp tone, Walter Campbell thought better of his vow, and sullenly signed his name to the bit of paper that called for every dollar he had deposited in bank.

"I thought you would reconsider the matter," said the black mask with a low, mocking laugh. "Money is good, but life is better. Dick, return the gentleman to his place of honor, and bring forth the next in order, Thomas Warren."

All of the prisoners had been eye and ear-witnesses of the foregoing, and the lesson read Walter Campbell served well for the rest. They knew that this was no idle farce, but terrible earnest, and though they were, in the majority of cases, forced to sign away almost their all, even this was preferable to being shot down like a mad-dog.

There was no loophole for escape. The black mask filled out each blank from information given her by Captain Cool Blade, and when the prisoners were led forward to sign, they found the bank with which they did business correctly written down in the proper place.

Campbell, who stood with his neck in the noose, moodily watching his fellows in misfortune following his example, at length addressed Hortense:

"What are you going to do with us after this farce is over? You have robbed us of everything, so I suppose you will let us go then?"

"All in good time, Mr. Campbell. I fear you would repent having settled these dues, and would try to stop the payment of your check, if we set you at liberty too soon. You shall be treated as leniently as the case will permit, and be given your freedom as soon as the drafts are honored—not before."

"If there should be any mistake—if the bank should refuse to pay—what then?" asked Warren.

"The motto of all true men should be 'death before dishonor!'" was the prompt response. "And if any check is refused payment, the man who signed it shall never live to hear of his disgrace."

"Let me see my check—I fear I have forgotten something," faltered Warren, licking his parched lips.

Hortense laughed mockingly as the man affixed his private mark to the check, but her mirth was abruptly checked by the appearance of a man, panting and almost breathless, who muttered a few words in her ear that drove all trace of triumph from her lips.

The man was Amariah Colby, and the tidings he brought bade fair to undo all that had been so patiently and cunningly wrought, even if it did not end in the death of the daring tax-collectors.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE.

Down amid the crumbling earth, the toppling trees, the rushing undergrowth—down into the

swirling waters that seemed to welcome him with their sullen roar—down from what seemed an incalculable height, Percy Talfourd was cast, for the moment unable to move a muscle to save himself. He had lost his balance through the sudden sinking of the apparently firm ground, added to the desperate effort which he instinctively made to prevent Marie Beaufort from sharing his fate, and the catastrophe followed too suddenly to give him time to recover himself.

The waters momentarily retreated from before the avalanche, only to return swiftly and cover the greater portion of the landslide. The tree-tops still stood out of the water, leaning at a sharp angle, the enormous quantity of dirt around their roots holding them stationary for the time, despite the hungry gnawing of the angry waters.

Down with this mingled mass the young planter had fallen to what seemed inevitable death.

But not even in that dire extremity did he lose his presence of mind. As his body struck the water, he flung out his arms and hurriedly inflated his lungs. He used every art in his power to prevent his sinking very far beneath the surface, and probably would have succeeded but for one fact. Some heavy object settled down upon his right foot and leg to the knee, pinning him firmly to the ground, the swirling waters rolling far above his head!

It was a truly terrible situation, and when Percy Talfourd realized the truth, he felt that he was doomed to death beyond the possibility of escape. And had it not been for his great love—had his life alone been at stake, there is little doubt, humanly speaking, but that he would have drowned there like a beaver in a trap.

The thought of Marie, his beloved, who might even then be calling upon him for help in the extremity of her peril, gave him strength and told him how best to use that power.

He was lying upon his back. By a desperate effort he raised the upper portion of his body and endeavored to learn how he was secured, by the sense of touch. That was not difficult. A huge slice of earth had slipped down, catching his leg and pinning it between its lip and the river bottom.

With frantic energy, Percy Talfourd tore away the crumbling dirt with his fingers, greatly aided by the dissolving action of the eddying water. But almost as fast as he tore away one handful, another settled down in its place. His brain was throbbing as though it would burst. He knew that unless he could gain a breath of fresh air in a very few seconds, he must perish. He drew up his left foot and put it against the gradually softening mass, and flung his whole strength into one desperate effort—and succeeded!

He shot swiftly through the water and drew in a long, glorious breath of the cool night air as he reached the surface. The one swift breath, then his entire powers of body and mind were devoted to the rescue of his beloved.

Where was she? Even as he asked himself the question, a low, choking cry came to his ringing ears—a cry that he believed came from Marie's lips. He sent up a swift, eager response, and an instant later, apparently from the bank above, there came back his own name, coupled with a quivering appeal for aid.

It was plain that the maiden had not been hurled into the water, since the sound of her voice came from above the surface, and apparently near the spot where Talfourd had flung her. But he did not pause to wonder or reason. She was alive, and stood in need of his help; that was quite sufficient to restore all his strength.

A few stout strokes carried him to land, but at first he was unable to scale the perpendicular bank. He floated a few yards further down-stream, and finally succeeded in his purpose, thanks to the aid lent by two or three roots which projected over the water.

Uttering Marie's name with eager encouragement, he hastened up the bank toward the spot that had so well-nigh proved fatal to them both. The maiden replied, and now, to his amazement, her voice sounded from below the level of the bank upon which he stood!

Incredible though it seemed, such was the fact; the maiden was suspended in mid-air, above the eddying waters, as her next words proved.

"Help, Percy! I am suspended by my skirt—and I can hear it rip even now! Help me—for the love of Heaven! do not delay!"

The night was so dark that Talfourd, strain his eyes as he might, could not catch even a glimpse of his betrothed; but the sound of her voice told him only too plainly that she was beyond his reach from above, if not from below. He dare not attempt to descend the bank. The loose earth was even now crumbling beneath his weight. There was not time to spend in hunting up a grape-vine long and flexible enough for the purpose, even if Marie had strength sufficient left her to hold on to it while he pulled her up. There was only one hope.

"I can't reach you from here," he cried, hastily. "I will go into the water and be ready to break your fall. When I call, try to break yourself loose, and trust the rest to me."

He did not pause for a reply, nor was there any made. The maiden was caught upon a stout root, near the hem of her skirt, and hanging head-downward, a rush of blood to the brain had finally robbed her of the power of speech.

Percy Talfourd ran a few yards up the river, then took the blind leap without a moment's hesitation. Quickly arising to the surface, he swept along close to the steep bank—only to be abruptly checked.

To his great joy he found that the land-slide was nearly level with the surface of the water, and as he scrambled upon it, almost the first grope of his uplifted arms came in contact with the body of his betrothed, who was hanging so low that only a few inches of space were between her dangling hands and the water.

Supporting her weight upon his breast and one arm, he reached up and grasping her skirt, quickly tore it loose. Sinking down upon his knees, he then bathed her head and face, which soon revived her, and lucky that this was the case.

All this time the sweeping current had been at work upon the huge obstruction, eating away the shaken dirt rapidly, and now one of the leaning trees—that which stood nearest the outer edge of

the land-slide—toppled over with a loud crash, its fall seriously shaking the stability of the rest.

Fearful of being caught among the branches or network of roots and vines, Percy encouraged Marie to lend him her aid, when they would soon be out of all danger.

A brief examination convinced him that it was impossible for them to scale the bank at this point, and so, bidding Marie hold fast to him as she had done on a former similar occasion, he groped his way along the bank until he reached the lower extremity of the land-slip. Entering the deep water, they floated along until at the point where he had scaled the bank a few minutes previously.

Here, though the task was a severe one and by no means devoid of danger, he succeeded in carrying the almost helpless maiden to the level ground above. Then they sunk down, breathless and exhausted, but devoutly grateful for their almost miraculous escape from death.

In a few minutes Marie recovered sufficiently to explain what had happened. The self devotion and presence of mind displayed by Percy Talfourd had almost certainly saved her life, for if she had borne him company in that terrible fall upon the land-slide, she could hardly have escaped drowning before he succeeded in releasing himself. But he had flung her quite across the widening crack in the earth, and though the crumbling edge gave way beneath her weight as she strove to regain her feet, she did not fall until after the huge mass had plunged into the river. As it was she grasped a dangling root that partially broke her fall, and when that frail support parted, her dress upheld her, as already detailed.

"We must wait here until daydawn," said the young planter, after sundry little cheering actions which do not directly concern the reader. "Even if the need of haste was double what it is, I could not think of exposing you to any more such dreadful risks."

Marie said nothing in reply. She had undergone so much, both bodily and mentally since the going down of the sun, that she had scarce spirit enough left to breathe or talk, much less to resume their difficult and tangled trail.

Talfourd divined this with a true lover's instinct, and raising her gently in his arms, he bore her away from the river-bank, lest it again prove treacherous, only pausing when at a safe distance. Then, seating himself with his back supported by the trunk of a tree, he drew Marie into a comfortable position against his breast.

Strange as it would seem under other circumstances, but a few minutes elapsed before both were soundly sleeping. Their double struggle for life had completely exhausted them both, nor did they awake until the pale light shimmering through the foliage above proclaimed the dawning day.

Though feeling stiff and sore, the young couple arose and resumed their toilsome journey. Even with the aid of daylight, it was no slight task to push their way through the matted vines and creepers, the stiff shrubbery and occasional patches of brambles, to cross over or pass around the fallen and decaying trees. The vegetation was so rank that not a breath of wind could be felt below the bushy tree-tops, and even this early in the day, it was oppressively sultry. It was hot, fatiguing work, nor did they have the remote satisfaction of knowing when the labor was come to an end, for they could only guess at the distance they must traverse before reaching their goal.

This was nearer than they had dared to hope, even in their most sanguine moments, and as they came to a bend in the river, Talfourd uttered a glad cry.

"At last! and a steamboat there too!"

"But it's on the wrong side of the river!" exclaimed Marie, dolefully, for she was nearly worn out.

"That can be easily remedied," laughed Percy, cheerfully. "We can hail a boat, and make our *entree* in style. Come! courage, little girl! It is not more than one short mile further, and then we will be fairly out of the wilderness."

"If father and mother are only there," wistfully.

"They are sure to be," promptly responded the young planter, and for the moment he did feel all the confidence he expressed, so elated was he at the prospect of a speedy escape from that truly detestable wilderness wherein they had suffered so much.

With renewed strength they pressed forward, little dreaming of what was still in store for them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THERE'S MUSIC IN THE AIR."

THE man who had so unceremoniously cut short the mocking laugh of the black mask, by his agitated appearance, was not allowed to impart the startling tidings he brought, to her, at least just then. A sharp whistle came from the darkness to the right, and recognizing the signal as one which he dared not disobey, Amariah Colby—for he it was—followed the sound like a hound running on a breast-high scent.

"You are losing what little wits you ever had," said Captain Cool Blade, sternly, as his strong hand closed firmly upon the shoulder of the swamp-magnate. "You would blurt out the bad news you bear before those men, and thus render them harder to handle. They are difficult enough to manage as it is. Well, speak out! what's the matter?"

"Steamboat's come—Magnolia," gasped Colby.

"Suppose it has? how does that concern us?" impatiently demanded Captain Cool Blade, though the answer burst upon his mind before the exhausted messenger could utter the words.

"They found the men you left tied up, and listened to the whole story. There were friends of these men you have here among the passengers of the Magnolia, and they were talking about making up a party to come after you—to rescue them," and Amariah Colby nodded toward the fire.

A fierce, grating curse parted the lips of the captain, but when he spoke, it was in a quiet tone.

"You did right in hastening to bring me warning, but you can do us more good there than here. You must not arouse suspicions against yourself, if it can be avoided. You heard them talk. Do you believe it will amount to anything more than talk? Do you think they will make up a rescuing party?"

"Yes: they were very bitter against you. I heard some swear that they would give no quarter—that

they would serve you one and all as you served Edmunds—the young fellow you shot."

"They must find us, first," said Captain Cool Blade with a grim laugh, that spoke louder than mere words. "Well, I won't keep you here much longer, for I need your help at the river. You must hasten back there, and watch your chance to drop down the river unseen in one of the skiffs. Take the swiftest and easiest pulling. Put in some whisky and something to eat. Take the chain and padlock along. Drop down the river to the broken-topped sycamore, and fasten the boat to its root. Lock it firmly, and put the key in the notch somebody cut in the north-east side of the tree. Make all the speed you can, consistent with prudence and safety. I need that boat, and will not be long behind you. Now you understand what you are to do?"

"Yes," and Amariah Colby rapidly gave a summary of his instructions. "The boat shall be there before you are ready for it, never fear."

"You shall lose nothing by it, my friend. Go, now, delay the pursuit as much as you can without showing your hand too plainly."

The swamp-magnate turned away without another word, and quickly faded from sight amid the woodland shadows.

Captain Cool Blade put his fingers to his lips and uttered a low, quivering whistle, which Hortense well knew was intended for herself. Until now she had waited with outward calmness and patience for some such summons, though her blood was boiling and her heart beat with unusual rapidity. She knew that there was some imminent danger threatening her and hers, and each moment that passed in ignorance was one of painful suspense, almost of torture. But as the anticipated signal floated to her ears upon the night air, she exhibited no undue haste in responding to the call.

"Watch these gentlemen closely, boys," she said with an admirably assumed unconcern. "They have paid their footing, but must bear patiently with their bonds for a few minutes longer. If they attempt to play any tricks, quiet them, even though you are obliged to use your weapons."

She said no more, for a second whistle came from out the darkness, as though the captain was growing impatient, and leaving both guards and prisoners wondering what fresh complication was in the wind, she hastened to the side of her husband.

"You are slow when there is no time to lose, Hortense," uttered Captain Cool Blade, a little impatiently, as the fair Amazon reached his side.

"I thought it best not to show too much haste before our prisoners, Henry. They are enough to give us trouble, if they are allowed to know what I suspect has occurred. A steamboat has stopped at the landing?"

"Yes, and there is talk of forming a party to follow us for the purpose of rescuing our game. Colby seemed confident that the attempt would be made."

"We can lead them a pretty dance through the swamp. There is little fear of their catching us, unless the prisoners suspect the truth and turn stubborn."

"If they do, they will cut their own throats. There is too much at stake for us to be squeamish, now. In three days at the outside, I can have those checks cashed, and put over a hundred thousand dollars in my pockets; but if a single man of them escapes, our plans will be knocked higher than a kite, and I will run the risk of being nabbed. You must hold them for that length of time, at any and all hazards. If that party does follow, and press you too closely, give the boys their orders to make sure of the prisoners. Remember, not one must escape, even though you have to shoot him down with your own hand!"

"If it becomes necessary, that shall be done," was the low response, "but I trust we can do better than that. My aversion to bloodshed grows stronger as I grow older, and I should consider even that large sum very dearly purchased at the cost of thirteen lives—and they taken in cold blood."

"What I have said must be done," responded Captain Cool Blade, with an emphasis that could not be mistaken. "If you are unable or dislike the task, repeat my orders to Dick Brown."

"While I draw the breath of life, I will never falter or hesitate to obey your commands, Henry," said Hortense with an earnest devotion that, in a better cause or for a more worthy object, would have been almost sublime. "But what about the woman? For, from your words, I judge you are about to leave us."

"I must leave her in your care, Hortense. She is here, at the foot of this tree. You must guard her even more carefully than the men. As I told you, she is the wife of our deadliest enemy, Jules Beaufort, as he now calls himself, and I mean that she shall in part repay me for all I have suffered through the treachery of her husband. Keep her safe, if you can, but rather than suffer her to escape, you must drive your dagger into her heart!"

The darkness hid the faint shudder which ran through the form of the fair Amazon at this fierce speech, but her voice was steady as she signified her readiness to carry out the will of her husband.

"You must strike out at once for the den. Break your trail as thoroughly as possible, and have out a scout or two to give you timely warning, in case the hounds come too close for comfort. If so, take to the swamps again, and bid the men stand ready to finish the game if they cannot save it. Only for that cursed alligator-hunter, Jim Adams, I wouldn't be so uneasy; but he knows the swamp better than he does his own face."

There was not much more said—nothing that need find a place in this record—for if the information brought by Amariah Colby had any foundation in truth, there was no time to waste. With a warm embrace and a fervid kiss, Captain Cool Blade bade Hortense adieu, and vanished from her sight amid the darkness.

With the skill of an old and experienced wood-ranger, Captain Cool Blade made his way through the darkness, seeming to avoid all obstacles by instinct, and laying an almost direct course for the point upon the river bank where he had directed Amariah Colby to have a boat in readiness for his use. And within an hour from the time of his parting with his wife, he reached the huge sycamore.

Feeling in the shallow notch indicated, his fingers closed upon a key, and he knew that the swamp-mag-

nate had not deceived him. Descending the bank, which was here quite sloping, he unlocked the boat, entered and pushed off into the current. Grasping the oars, which hung upon the thole-pins, he pulled vigorously with a strength and dexterity that sent the light craft shooting swiftly down the river.

He was working for an enormous stake, and was resolved to fail through no fault of his own. Through the remaining portion of that night and nearly all of the next day he kept plying the oars with hardly a minute's intermission. Then he ceased pulling, suffering the skiff to drift with the current.

He ate heartily, and lit a cigar, leaning back in as comfortable a position as his limited accommodations would admit. He glanced over the check-book which he had received from Hortense then tore out the baker's-dozen of drafts, rolling them up and stowing them away in a metallic tobacco-box, where they would not get wet, no matter if he should happen to be upset.

For nearly a week his rest had been very much broken, nor had he closed his eyes in sleep for fifty-odd hours. It is not to be wondered at, then, that, as he lay there musing and smoking, he should fall into a deep and heavy sleep that lasted for hours, nor that a new day was dawning when he awoke.

A bitter curse was upon his lips as he realized how much time he had wasted in slumber, but the impression was changed to an exclamation of pleasure as he heard the puffing of a steamboat coming down the river, not far behind him.

"There'll be no time lost, after all, if I can only board her. If? By heavens! I can and will!"

Perhaps if Captain Cool Blade could have known who was to be the first person he would meet, he might not have been quite so determined to board that craft!

CHAPTER XXV.

CLEARING FOR ACTION.

AFTER the storm came a calm, so far as Abner Clark was concerned. The day had opened anything but auspiciously for him, but the closing made ample amends, and never a man who was happier than he.

The bruises he had received in the stubborn fight with Dean Ashley were forgotten, as were the fatigue and weariness that followed his desperate exertion in behalf of the unfortunate passengers of the War Eagle. Love was the potent medicine, and Dorinda Colby the practicing physician.

As Amariah Colby had reasoned, Mrs. Jules Beaufort had been rescued from the river by Abner Clark, after the main party of rescuers had abandoned the search as useless. The manner in which he did so, has already been described. She was still insensible when he reached the Landing, and not knowing how seriously she might be injured, his first thought was to take her at once to Dorinda and her mother, both of whom he felt would gladly lend their assistance.

Nor was he mistaken in this supposition. That Abner Clark asked the favor, would at any time be reason sufficient, but just now Dorinda was especially anxious to please the young farmer, while Mrs. Colby was proud of her skill as a nurse.

Thus Mrs. Beaufort met with a cordial welcome, and was quickly restored to consciousness.

The lovers found Mrs. Colby unusually considerate that evening. She refused the proffered aid of her daughter, and laughingly bade them go and amuse themselves until she called them. This was all the more remarkable that, until now, she had rather seemed inclined to frown upon the suit of the young farmer, but it can easily be explained.

Amariah Colby had told her, as soon as he returned with the rest from down the river, that Captain Cool Blade was at hand, and that he fancied there would be work for them to do before the lapse of many hours.

For this reason she preferred keeping upon the alert, and knowing that Abner Clark was as honest as the day was long, besides being nobody's fool, she called in the aid of the unsuspecting Dorinda to keep him out of the way of making trouble.

Neither of the lovers had any suspicions of the truth, and with hearts as light as love could make them, they improved the present golden opportunity by taking possession of the "best room," which was at the opposite end of the house from that room in which Mrs. Beaufort was reclining.

A love scene, where both parties are in accord and truly desirous of pleasing each other, as in the present case, would possess but little interest for the general reader, nor would it have been alluded to at all, only for the purpose of explaining why the one honest man of the settlement who retained his sober senses, had made no opposition to the bold plans of Captain Cool Blade and his outlaws.

Abner did hear the report of the pistol which carried death to the bold planter, and half-started from his seat with the intention of investigating the cause, but Dorinda coquettishly restrained him. He was not difficult to convince that he had heard nothing out of the way, even if a pistol had been discharged. There could be no trouble brewing, else there would have been an outcry either before or after the report. They neither of them had the faintest suspicion of what was really going on about them.

They took no note of time, and they sat in darkness for there were no screens at the windows, and a light would only serve to attract the moths and bugs. Besides, any person who has been through the mill can tell you that after a certain stage in courtship, lovers have very little need of a candle, lamp or gas-light to enable them to do their "spark-ing."

Though no coward, in ordinary matters, Abner found himself much more courageous in the dark, and from regretting that Dorinda was about to be absent for so long a time, he soon began to persuade her that she would enjoy herself much better if she would change her mind and stay at home. Her home, he meant at first, but as his courage increased, this was changed to *their* home, and then— But why ring the changes? Dorinda's heart was heartily agreeing with every word he spoke, and it was not long before her tongue began to timidly answer his suggestions with other ones, gradually allowing herself to be convinced, and veering around until they were in perfect accord upon every point.

Everything was planned to their satisfaction save

the one all-important point of the wedding-day, when a deep, melodious whistle came to their ears from down the river, announcing the approach of a steamboat and its purpose of landing at that point.

The lovers forgot for the moment the interesting subject they were discussing, and Abner caught up his hat and left the house, followed by Dorinda.

To his no little amazement, they two appeared to be the only persons afoot. The men whom he had helped to save from a watery grave, were lying around the smoldering embers of the fire, apparently fast locked in slumber. And still nearer to him he saw Big Jim Adams and the employees of Amariah Colby, lost to consciousness and snoring in most unmelodious concert.

He paused beside the last named, and called to them, even using his boot upon the man nearest him, but all to no purpose. His shouts brought forth Amariah Colby and his wife, the first of whom hastened over to where he stood, yawning sleepily.

"They're clean worn out, I reckon," he said, sleepily. "You go and wake up the strangers. I'll rout up the boys. That's the Magnolia, from the sound of her 'scape-pipes, and she'll want wood."

Thus it was that to Abner Clark fell the lot of discovering the tragedy that had taken place.

When his calls were unanswered by those who he believed were sleeping, he stirred up the fire and the red light fell upon the ghastly face of the dead man.

A cry of wondering horror parted his lips, for he believed that the others were dead, also. Only for an instant, and when Amariah Colby came running up, in admirably enacted surprise and horror, Abner was rapidly freeing the half-suffocated planters from their bonds and gags.

The steamboat, which proved to be the Magnolia, was at the landing before any of the released captives could tell their strange story, and then a scene of the wildest excitement ensued. Among the passengers of the Magnolia were many friends and acquaintances of the men carried away to an unknown fate, and ere long some one proposed making up a party for the purpose of following the trail and rescuing their friends, at the same time punishing the audacious criminals. The captain of the Magnolia was one of the foremost in this demonstration, and asked Amariah Colby which one of his men was most thoroughly acquainted with the country around them.

"Most any one of them would do," the swamp-magnate responded, slowly, "but there has been strange doings all around. The men are over yonder, so sound asleep I can't wake 'em up."

"Jim Adams is your man," cried Clark. "He'll be worth all the rest put together. I'll fetch him."

The young farmer kept his word, but not so easily. He saw the empty jug that had evidently contained whisky, but he knew that this sleep was not altogether a drunken one, as shouting and punching failed to arouse the big alligator-hunter. He found a bucket, and repeatedly filling it from the river, as often dashed its contents into the face of the heavily-breathing hunter, finally arousing him sufficiently to walk.

Meanwhile, it was made known that those on board the Magnolia had heard the sound of the War Eagle's explosion, though many miles down the river. The fears thus aroused were confirmed when they stopped at a wood-yard, and the men there told them that it must have been the War Eagle, since she was the last boat to pass up the river.

The Magnolia put on an extra head of steam, and lit her fire-crater upon the bows, keeping the crew on watch, and both boats in readiness, hoping to rescue some of the unfortunates, if their fears of an accident proved founded on fact.

In due course of time they began to notice the floating debris of the wreck, and at once sent out the two boats. A number of dead bodies were recovered, but only two were rescued with the breath of life still in their nostrils; Jules Beaufort and a roustabout who was too badly injured to be able to give his name.

A surgeon who was among the passengers of the Magnolia, created a fresh sensation by declaring that Jim Adams and his friends were suffering from the effects of some preparation of opium, and volunteered to put them in working order.

Amariah Colby lingered around the edge of the excited crowd, gleaning all he could of their intentions, and when fully satisfied that they really intended to attempt the rescue of their friends, he stole away and made all haste to warn Captain Cool Blade.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DESPERATE MAN.

WALTER CAMPBELL was a shrewd, quick-witted man, who had little difficulty in divining the purport of the tidings brought by Amariah Colby. Only the arrival of a boat, which meant a discovery of all that had transpired, could have so startled the outlaws. He had, in addition, a shrewd suspicion that there would be an attempt at rescue, though he could not feel very sanguine of its success. He was no stranger to the swamp country, and knew how much easier it was for men to lose themselves amid its tangled recesses, than it would be to find others who were desirous of lying in concealment.

He was a stranger to the word fear, as applied to himself, but he was no rash fool to court certain death. He had submitted thus far, simply because he could do no less and live. But he had resolved from the first to make his escape at the first opportunity that offered, and though he had thus far been baffle he was more determined than ever.

His hands had been firmly rebound after his signature was obtained, and ever since then he had been cautiously working to loosen the cords. In this he succeeded even beyond his hopes, for though Dick Brown had not slighted the job, the rope furnished by Amariah Colby was new, and the knots did not lie close.

Immediately after the departure of Captain Cool Blade, Hortense returned and gave her men orders to start at once for "the den," adding:

"Gentlemen, circumstances have arisen which make it necessary for us to make a forced march. Thus far you have been treated leniently and with no little consideration, but the time for mere politeness has passed. I solemnly warn you, one and all, that if any man among you gives us any trouble, or

tries to delay our advance, that man or men shall die in his tracks. Please bear this in mind, for it is the only warning you will receive. Neglect it at your peril!"

There was no room for doubt left by her words or the tone in which she spoke. All could see that she was in sober, deadly earnest.

No questions were asked, though the outlaws knew that Amariah Colby had brought anything but agreeable tidings. They set their living chain in motion without delay, and urged it on through the black night with a rapidity that spoke well for their knowledge of the country through which they were passing, and their proficiency as slave-drivers.

As before, Walter Campbell was at the head of the human chain, and now that he was away from the glare of the fire, he worked more boldly at the bit of rope which bound his hands behind him, and in a very few minutes succeeded in slipping first one hand and then the other out of the loop.

Two of the outlaws were close by him, Brown leading the way, while James was almost alongside, holding the end of the long rope which held the human chain together. But Campbell did not falter now that the crisis was fairly at hand.

With one hand grasping the rope, he held it in such a manner that James could not detect any difference in the tension, then gently cast off the noose from around his throat. This done, he dropped the rope and dashed out both his clenched fists at the shadowy outline of the outlaw's head. His distance was well calculated, and the burly outlaw was knocked end over end into the darkness, too thoroughly surprised to make any outcry.

Without an instant's pause, Campbell leaped forward and assaulted Dick Brown, with almost equal success. That worthy was turning around to investigate the cause of the sudden disturbance, and so escaped one of the sledge-hammer fists, but the power of the other was quite sufficient to knock him endways into the bushes, seeing more stars than would have been visible to other eyes on the most cloudless night.

A more generous man might have endeavored to follow up this good beginning, and set his comrades at liberty, but Campbell was satisfied to leave well enough alone. He was fighting his own battle, and others might do the same.

Without pausing to note the effect of his last blow, he turned and fled at break-neck speed through the darkness. There was no time for any display of cunning or strategy, for he knew that speedily if not instant pursuit would be made, and a few rods advantage gained at the start might make all the difference between escape and recapture.

He had not run a hundred yards before he heard the sounds of pursuit, and bent to his work as one who knew that not only his worldly all but life itself rested on the result. If overtaken now, he would be put to death without mercy.

The odds were terribly against him. Those in pursuit were reared if not born in the swamps, and were as much at home there as the bear or the alligator. They knew the lay of the ground thoroughly, which he did not. He was blindly floundering through bogs that threatened to engulf him, falling over roots and prostrate tree-trunks, or running into vines and brambles through which he could not force his way. All seemed conspiring against his escape, and in his desperation he suddenly lay down beside a huge log that was half submerged in the mingled mud and water, stilling his heavy breathing as best he could, and holding himself in readiness to do stout battle for his life in case he was discovered, as seemed almost inevitable.

Here the darkness stood his friend, and though three of his enemies paused almost within arm's length of his refuge, they were plainly ignorant of his proximity, for one, Hortense, said:

"He must not be allowed to escape and tell his story. He will make the best of his way to the Landing, hoping to get away on the boat. We haven't time to search for him here. You two must get to the river ahead of him, and cut him off. Don't try to recapture him. Shoot him down at sight, no matter what the risk to yourselves. Go!"

Go they did, without a word or reply, and Hortense hastened back to where the remainder of the captives were guarded by the other four men.

Campbell lay still until fully convinced that his enemies had really departed, then arose from his slimy resting-place and struck out for the river, intending to reach it at a point above the Landing, and thus escape the snare that was set for him.

The distance in a straight line was not more than three miles, but that was equal to a dozen on an open course, so tangled was the swamp and so difficult the traveling in the dark. Despite his exertions, the gray light in the east was dawning when Campbell neared the river.

Confused by the many little *detours* he had been forced to make, the fugitive struck the river a few rods below where the steamboat was moored, instead of above as he intended. He saw an excited crowd gathered near the end of the gang-plank, and feeling that the outlaws would not dare make any demonstration in the face of such a strong force, he hastened toward them.

But before he quite gained the point, a sharp crack came from the line of bushes, and he felt a burning pain shoot through his side. He believed that he had received his death-wound, and longing for revenge, he staggered forward, shouting for the armed party to avenge him.

His appeal was unnecessary. Big Jim Adams saw him stagger, heard the rifle-crack and turned in time to catch a glimpse of the flame-tinged smoke. The next instant his huge form was in motion and flying toward the ambush. The assassin, believing his duty accomplished, arose and fled at top speed for the swamp. But the avenger of blood was upon his track. Before he had taken a dozen strides, the big alligator-hunter caught sight of the assassin, and pausing, leveled his heavy rifle. The report followed almost instantaneously, and Dick Brown plunged headlong to the earth, dead, a half-ounce bullet passing through his body.

Campbell was surrounded by sympathizing friends, but almost immediately recovered from the shock of the outlaw's bullet, which had inflicted a trifling flesh wound.

He hastily told the story of his escape, and gave as clear directions as he could for the finding of the enemy, but apparently decided to accompany the

rescuing party, when it was learned how trifling a wound he had received. He did set out with the party, which had been on the point of taking the trail under guidance of Jim Adams, when he made his appearance, but he watched his opportunity and stole away from them before they lost sight of the clearings. Hastening back to the river, he unfastened one of the two skiffs and entering it, pulled swiftly down the river.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WAR TO THE HILT.

Not only Jim Adams, but every one of Amariah Colby's hired hands who had succumbed to the power of the drugged whisky, were burning for satisfaction, and gladly joined the rescuing party. It was plain that they had been drugged in order to guard against their interfering with the bold game of the robbers, and they knew that the generous stranger who so feelingly expressed his gratitude for their having rescued him from a watery grave, must have belonged to the gang. How he had contrived to administer the obnoxious drug, passed their powers of understanding, since Parker, the man who had drawn the liquor from the cask, solemnly swore that the stranger never so much as touched the jug until he drank their healths in the presence of them all. Still, drugged they had been, and they swore to have satisfaction.

The desertion of Walter Campbell was not noticed for nearly an hour, and but little attention was paid to the fact then. They were in force enough to make short work of the five or six men who he declared formed the whole of the outlaw force in charge of the prisoners, and the big alligator-hunter declared that he could take them to the enemy as true as a hound on a fresh trail. Nor was the boast an idle one, as after events proved.

There may be a few among my Northern readers to whom the statement will prove a surprise, but the Lower Mississippi, practically speaking, *runs along a ridge*. Of course the shores, or "coasts" as they are called by the natives, are higher than the river, but this is only a mere strip of land, of varying width, and beyond it, the country is considerably below the level of the river. This strip of elevated ground varies from a hundred rods to several miles in width, and is pretty much all under cultivation. It slopes gradually away from the river until it reaches the "swamp country," which also varies in width, being sometimes a score of miles in extent. This again is divided into the swamp regular, which is a never drained morass, consisting of marshes and lagoons, covered with reeds and coarse grass, and that portion where the inundation is only annual. This last tract is covered with a luxuriant vegetable growth forming a dark, gloomy and almost impenetrable forest, composed principally of cypress trees, though several species of oaks are to be found, together with the water-locust, the cotton-wood, tupelo, sweet-gum and magnolia.

Such was the nature of the country in which the outlaws commanded by the wife of Captain Cool Blade were seeking safety with their prisoners.

Through the forest, difficult as the majority of his followers found it, the big alligator-hunter pressed along the trail rapidly, finding nothing to balk his progress. He knew, though, that there was more difficult work ahead, and did not indulge in any premature exultation. He saw that their game was making direct for an awkward portion of the regular swamp, and though he felt confident of running them down eventually, he knew that it would consume much time and require skill and dogged perseverance.

The emergency which he foresaw, was not long in coming. Before long the trail they were following divided into four sections, each one pursuing a different direction.

By general consent the party evidently looked upon the big alligator-hunter as their leader, for no one uttered a suggestion as they came to a halt, and every eye was turned expectantly upon him. The old man was flattered not a little, though he gave no outward evidence of the fact.

"They's fo' trails now, as ye kin see fer yourself," he muttered, in an oracular tone, "but af' we reach the end, thar'll be only one ag'in. The varmints hev divided up, hopin' we as is follerin' o' 'em will do the same. 'Twouldn't be likely thar'd be fo' men among us with knowledgeable judgment enough to pick up a trail that lays under two feet o' mud and water. One, two, or mebbe three out o' the fo', 'd lose a trail an' git lost themselves in the swamp, which is just what them p'izen critters count on. They scatter, break thar trails the best way they kin, an' then strike all hands for the randy-vo they agreed on afore they split up. Thar they'll lay low, in readiness to ambush the fust party as comes along. Countin' the vantage o' gittin' in the fust blow, they could easy flax out any quarter of our party, which is jest what they 'low to do."

"You think, then, that all these trails will come together again?" asked the captain of the Magnolia.

"Sartain sure to," was the prompt response. "Thar's a dozen prisoners, an' not more 'n half thar many men to guard them. 'Tain't reasonable one man's goin' to take charge of two or three captives fer any length o' time whar the gittin' along is as difficult as this ahead o' us. It 'd be too much like tryin' to thaw out a keg o' gunpowder by stirrin' it up with a red-hot iron. Sooner or later the men in his keer would ketch him foul, an' then it would be good-by—John!"

"No, those fo' trails will come together an' jine into one, the same size as this we've bin follerin' sence daylight. All we've got to do is to take one o' 'em and stick to it ontel the end."

There was sound sense in the reasoning of the alligator-hunter, and as there was no man among the party save himself who felt capable of lifting a trail successfully through that dreary waste, it was finally agreed to act just as Jim Adams believed best.

There was no time lost by this discussion, or rather statement of the case, for, after three hours of steady progress through that difficult region, the volunteers felt the need of a breathing-spell. The ardor of the majority was not a little cooled by the natural difficulties they had encountered, though they were kept from saying as much by a feeling of shame. It would be disgraceful to retreat so soon, after the loud vauntings with which they set

forth upon the trail, but the unlucky prisoners came in for quite as many unspoken curses as did their captors.

Jim Adams struck out along one of the four trails, but had not followed it for more than a mile, before he began to realize that he had underrated the skill of his enemy. At the end of an hour, he was obliged to admit that he had lost the trail, calling a halt and selecting several of Amariah Colby's hands, including Abner Clark, all of whom he dispatched in different directions to aid in recovering the lost trail.

All of an hour was spent in this manner, then Adams summoned the party to follow him. They could see nothing, but deferring to his superior skill, believed that he was upon the trail. Instead, he was using head-work. He believed he knew the point for which the enemy was heading, and was now leading his men directly thither.

More to his satisfaction than surprise, he came upon a trail before journeying a mile, and though it was larger than any one of the four, he believed that it had been made by the reunited party.

"We'll most likely find them on that island, yonder," he said, indicating a long, low patch of trees and dense undergrowth that lay before them, and which was really "the den" alluded to by Captain Cool Blade. "The trail leads straight thar. Git ready for hot work. We must run right in on 'em, or they'll pick us off one by one from that close river. Don't let any one git away. Now—charge!"

There was no hesitation or holding back as the big alligator-hunter led the way at a rapid trot through the knee-deep water and mud. A fight, however deadly, was far preferable to a longer toiling through such a disgusting region.

But the expected volley did not come, and the island was reached without any opposition. Not a sound came from the dense covert, and Adams began to suspect that he had made a mistake.

At that instant a wild cry came from a smaller island some two hundred yards to the right.

"This way—help! for the love of Heaven, rescue me!"

The last words were blended with the sharp explosion of a pistol or gun, closely followed by a blood-curdling scream of bitter agony.

There could be no doubt as to the spot from whence proceeded these sounds, for a wreath of blue smoke arose and hung over the small island. The rescuing party saw this, and only too easily divined its meaning. The prisoner who had called aloud to them a moment before, had been ruthlessly murdered.

There was no need for Big Jim Adams to bid them charge. The volunteers were no cowards. They knew that their enemy was before them, and believed that one of their abducted friends had been shot down like a wild beast.

With angry yells they plunged through the mud and water toward the island.

They were not destined to reap a bloodless victory. A cornered foe is proverbially dangerous, and the outlaws were men who had long carried their lives in their hands, and who knew that they fought with a halter around their necks.

Before one-half the intervening distance had been covered, a sheet of flame-tinged smoke shot out from the dense covert, and two of the charging volunteers plunged head-first into the mire, shot dead. Others were sharply stung, and though they had expected some such reception, the party was staggered.

Adams noted this, and springing to the front, he shouted in a stentorian voice:

"Scatter out so they can't take a pot-shot, an' charge home!" but there came an appeal even more potent than any he could utter:

"Help! they are murdering us!" an agonized voice shrieked from the little island.

And close following the appeal came the discharge of half a dozen revolvers—but none of the bullets whistled around the volunteers. Beyond a doubt the outlaws were murdering their captives!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FATAL SHOT.

THE mate of the Magnolia heard the call which Percy Talfourd sent across the river for a boat, and having satisfied himself that there was a woman in the case, at once jumped to the conclusion that those who appealed to him for the means of crossing the river, were survivors of the recent explosion. Outside of his everyday occupation, the worthy mate prided himself on being something of a ladies' man, and was in no wise loth to display his gallantry in behalf of one of the fair sex.

Calling out four of the deck hands, he bade them man the smallest yawl, taking the steering-oar himself. The force of the current was such that they were obliged to pull a few rods up the river in order to strike the opposite shore at or near the point where the young couple were awaiting their arrival, and even then it was no easy task to effect a crossing. But the rowers had plenty of muscle, and no man knew better than the mate how to call it into full play. So well did he exercise this power, that ten minutes later, the yawl reached the opposite side of the river.

In accordance with the mate's orders, the stern of the yawl was held against the land, and he received the form of Marie Beaufort in his strong arms, as Percy Talfourd handed her down the steep, muddy bank. The young planter quickly followed, and was recognized by the mate, who also knew the maiden by sight, though he could not claim a speaking acquaintance with either of them.

This put an end to the little romance which he had allowed his mind to half-shape, but the recognition gave him ample food for his tongue.

By his orders the men pulled leisurely up along the shore, to lessen their struggle with the current in crossing over. He knew that Jules Beaufort was this fair creature's father, and he endeavored to break the truth to her gently and by degrees. Marie would not have it so, however. She grew so seriously agitated that the tender-hearted mate found his considerate programme all knocked endways.

He told of the rescue of Jules Beaufort, and admitted that the surgeon in attendance considered the case a critical one. Apart from the gun-shot wounds upon his person, the planter had been quite severely scalded, and had broken several of his ribs,

probably when the wreck of the War Eagle went down.

"But he will soon recover and be himself again, Miss Beaufort," added the mate, politely. "His anxiety on your account once set at rest—"

"And my mother—she was aboard the boat—can you tell me anything of her?" faltered Marie.

"Nothing of my own knowledge, but I overheard a young man, named Clark, when the captain was making out a list of those rescued, say that Mrs. Beaufort was alive and unhurt, at one of the houses—Amariah Colby's, I believe."

A sob of thankfulness broke from the relieved heart of the maiden. Both of her parents were alive, and although one of them was injured, matters might have been so much worse. So many had died—scores and scores of unfortunates—that she could not be sufficiently thankful that not one of her near and dear ones had been of the number.

The crossing was effected in safety, and the young couple made all haste through the inquisitive crowd boarding the Magnolia, under escort of the mate, who led them direct to the state-room where Jules Beaufort was lying in a heavy, unnatural sleep, produced by potent drugs administered by the surgeon.

Marie glanced around her uneasily, after the first silent greeting which she imprinted upon the damp brow of the unconscious planter. Talfourd readily interpreted her look, and he, too, felt no little surprise at not finding Mrs. Beaufort in attendance upon her husband. Could it be that the mate was mistaken in supposing she had been rescued, or, if so, was she more seriously injured than he believed?

Percy questioned the stewardess, whom the doctor had left in charge of the planter, himself accompanying the rescuing party, where he believed his services would be needed in a professional way, but the woman could give them no satisfaction, further than to confirm the mate's report. She, too, had heard that a Mrs. Beaufort was among the rescued, but supposed there must be some mistake about her being this man's wife, else she would naturally have hastened at once to his side.

Talfourd knew that no other persons of that name had been passengers aboard the War Eagle, and though he concealed his uneasiness from Marie, he felt a strange anxiety as he left the boat and inquired which one of the houses was occupied by Amariah Colby. The mate volunteered to show him, as he knew the family, that being one of the places where the Magnolia regularly wooded up.

Mrs. Colby was not taken by surprise. Amariah had been present when Abner Clark spoke of Mrs. Beaufort, and he knew that her name had been put down upon the list of those rescued from the river. Sooner or later there would be inquiries made concerning her, and the worthy couple had decided to tell at least a portion of the truth. This disagreeable duty Amariah Colby delegated to his wife, and it was Mrs. Colby that answered Talfourd's inquiries.

"Yes, a lady whom Abner Clark rescued from the river, and who gave her name as Mrs. Beaufort, had been an inmate of her house, up to midnight, or a little later. At that time a stranger, one of the rescued party, as he said and as she had no occasion to doubt at the time, came to the house and asked to see Mrs. Beaufort. She admitted him, and overheard him tell the lady that her husband had just been brought up the river, badly injured—that if she wished to see him in life again, there was no time to lose. The lady immediately arose and followed the stranger, and she, Mrs. Colby, had barely time to fling a shawl over the lady's shoulders, ere she was gone. No, she didn't notice which way they went. She had her hands full in caring for the unfortunate wounded. She could tell them nothing more; nor did she.

The young planter was sadly puzzled, and knew not what to do, until he overheard a chance remark that the bold robbery and abduction savored somewhat of Captain Cool Blade—and then he remembered the fiendish look that distorted the adventurer's countenance as he hissed those bitter words in the ear of Jules Beaufort as he lay bleeding at his feet. Could it be that the man's hatred extended even to the innocent and helpless? It might be, and at least there could be no harm done in acting upon the supposition. What would be easier than to remain idle?

Percy Talfourd had an abundance of money, nor was he afraid to spend it with a free hand. This, added to his personal magnetism, soon enabled him to enlist a dozen stout men, all well armed, and at the head of whom, as soon as he could procure weapons for himself, he entered the forest upon the broad trail left by the party led by the alligator-hunter.

Pressing on at full speed they reached the spot where the prisoners had been forced to sign the checks filled out by the wife of Captain Cool Blade, and there one of the men made a discovery which appeared to be proof positive that they were upon the right scent. This was the heavy shawl which Captain Cool Blade had used to stifle the cries of terror that Mrs. Beaufort tried to utter, when she realized the nature of the snare into which she had so cunningly been lured. It lay where Hortense took charge of the woman, after the hurried retreat of Captain Cool Blade.

Encouraged by this discovery, Percy Talfourd led the way at a pace that severely tested the breath and bottom of his followers, and, as the party under Jim Adams had no occasion to avoid leaving a broad trail, his progress was far more rapid than that of either of the bands which had passed over the same ground before him, since he was not obliged to lose any time in either searching for or obliterating his trail.

Thus it chanced that when the first shot was fired by the outlaws, the report was quite plainly heard by our friends, and as they pressed forward without a pause, they soon came in sight of a doubly burdened horse, crossing an open space almost directly before them.

Talfourd uttered an involuntary cry and flung forward his rifle as he recognized the pale, terror-stricken face of Mrs. Beaufort—a cry that caused the mad rider to abruptly rein in his horse. That involuntary action was a fatal mistake, for the rifle of the young planter exploded with a sure aim and both riders rolled sideways off the horse's back.

The black rider partially arose, and, before Percy could reach them, struck Mrs. Beaufort twice with a long, glittering dagger! But that was the end.

When Talfourd reached them, the black rider was dead.

Even in that moment of intense excitement the young planter could not mistake the truth.

"Merciful heavens!" he cried, "I have shot a woman!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

For an instant Big Jim Adams and his volunteers stood as though petrified, when the fearful truth burst upon them; that the enemy were fiendishly murdering their helpless prisoners. Such barbarity seemed utterly incredible, yet nevertheless it was the truth. The orders given by Captain Cool Blade had been positive, and admitted of no alternative, and his word was law to Hortense.

Though her prisoners had not dared to show open insubordination, after her stern warning, yet they had managed to retard the flight not a little. Still it was probable that the outlaws would have succeeded in throwing the volunteers off the scent, despite the skill of Jim Adams, only for one fact.

It has been mentioned that the larger portion of that particular band, under command of one Stephens, was off on a foray, or marauding expedition. This proved to be a failure, and the party returned to their customary rendezvous much earlier than anticipated. Suspecting nothing of what was in the wind, they took no precautions to conceal their trail, and it was their spoor that Jim Adams hit, after his vain search for the other.

Hortense fully realized the peril, but she knew that there was no time to rectify the mistake. It had taken so long to carry out her own precautions, that she knew the enemy were close at hand, following up the fatal trail. The prisoners were too tired to flee at any rapid pace, and as the best that offered, she bade her party leave the den as cautiously as possible, and take refuge upon the lower and smaller island.

This was done, and even now they might have escaped discovery had not one of the prisoners, catching a glimpse of his friends, forgot the warning he had received and raised his voice in a startling appeal for help.

So unexpected was this, that James, who was nearest the man, sent a bullet through his skull before he realized how surely the sound would betray their refuge.

Hortense saw that a conflict was inevitable, and believed that it must end disastrously to her party. Though they held the advantage of position, they were outnumbered two to one.

Fully acquainted with the story of her husband's past life, she realized the importance of retaining possession of Mrs. Beaufort, and after bidding the outlaws fight to the bitter end, and to make sure that none of the prisoners were rescued alive, she mounted her horse, taking Mrs. Beaufort up before her, and fled from the island, keeping it between her and the enemy until out of sight. Fled, only to meet death at the hands of Percy Talfourd, who little thought at the time that he was firing upon a woman.

But a single instant did the volunteers hesitate. Then, their rage and ardor redoubled by the knowledge that their helpless friends were being foully assassinated before their very faces, they charged upon the island with a blind fury that was irresistible.

There was a fight, for the outlaws had not anticipated such a swift and deadly onset after the severe lesson they had already taught the volunteers, but it was as brief as it was deadly. There was no thought of giving quarter, and though in one or two cases, wounded outlaws begged for their lives, their appeals were fiercely answered by a pistol-shot or a knife-thrust. They had been arrested in the very act of assassinating a dozen bound and helpless captives. Mercy was not for such diabolical fiends.

Abner Clark had the grim satisfaction of gaining a second victory over the handsome adventurer who had striven so assiduously to wreck his love-life, but this time Dean Ashley lay still when the young farmer arose to his feet. A long knife was thrust to the hilt in his bosom.

The strife ceased only when the last outlaw fell dead. The onset was so swift, that only two or three of the party had time to flee, and they were shot down in swift succession.

The victors had suffered. Five of their number had fallen dead, while as many more bore the deep hand-writing of their desperate foes, and seven of the prisoners had been murdered.

These losses were being summed up, when the party organized by Percy Talfourd came up, and related their strange story. The young planter had remained behind with Mrs. Beaufort, to whose assistance the gallant surgeon at once hastened.

He found her wounds were by no means dangerous, though painful, and quickly stanching the flow of blood, temporarily bandaging the cuts. The will of Hortense had been good, but the swift approach of death so weakened her arm that she failed to carry out her deadly purpose. She struck blindly and with but little force.

Rude and hastily constructed but comfortable litters were prepared upon which Mrs. Beaufort and such of the wounded as were unable to make the return journey on foot, were placed, and the united forces set out for Colby's Landing.

Percy Talfourd supported one end of a litter on which rested a slender figure clad in black—all that remained of the one-time belle of the Crescent City, Hortense, wife of Captain Cool Blade. No matter what the crimes of her life might have been, she was a woman, and he could not leave her body there in the swamp for foul birds or beasts to feed upon. If not in consecrated ground, at least the body should have a decent burial.

Great was the excitement when the victorious party returned to Colby's Landing, and the story of their adventures made known. A curious crowd flocked to gaze upon the remains of the woman robber, and, though Percy Talfourd put a stop to the scene as quickly as possible, by conveying the body into Amariah Colby's house, more than one among the Southern passengers recognized the dead woman. This fact by no means lessened the feverish interest. The romantic wedding and honeymoon of years ago was remembered and discussed, and it became the general belief of all aboard the Magnolia that Captain Cool Blade was at the bottom of the affair.

lia that Captain Cool Blade was at the bottom of the affair.

Percy Talfourd made arrangements with Amariah Colby for the burial of the ill-fated woman, for the captain of the Magnolia, now that their main object was accomplished, was eager to make up for lost time, and gave the signal for resuming their journey.

Nor were the men who had been rescued any the less anxious to be off. Now that their lives were safe, they could think of their money. It might be possible to stop payment of the checks, even yet, and perhaps to effect the arrest of the one who attempted to cash them. This could be done by telegraphing from the city above, unless there was some unusual delay in getting there.

Mrs. Beaufort was carried on board the steamboat, and there met her daughter. This, with the knowledge that her husband was still alive, seemed to strengthen the lady wonderfully, and when the surgeon had properly dressed her wounds, he gave it as his opinion that his patient would be quite herself again in the course of a week or so.

But misfortune still pursued the passengers of the War Eagle. The Magnolia had not made ten miles from Colby's Landing before she ran aground upon a newly-formed sandbar. The paddle-wheels were reversed and churned the turbid waters into a muddy spray, but without stirring the steamer an inch from her sandy bed. The spars were brought into use, and worked for hour after hour, without producing the desired effect. And as the river was falling rapidly, their situation grew more hopeless with every minute. Though the work was still persisted in, it was evident to all that the Magnolia could never back off of that bar unaided. Fate seemed against Warren and his brother planters.

But then, as the afternoon sun was growing low in the West, the smoke of a descending steamboat was seen up the river, and from the captain down, all aboard the Magnolia felt like sending up a prayer of thanksgiving.

The signal of distress was made, and the descending vessel at once made its arrangements for aiding the unfortunates. Turning gracefully as it passed by, it held its own against the current until stout hawsers were secured to each boat, then the wheels of both vessels turned more and more rapidly, until the Magnolia slipped backward from the sandbar, once more free to pursue its watery, dangerous path.

The various dispatches had already been written, and the moment the Magnolia reached the wharf, Thomas Warren sprung ashore and made all haste to the telegraph-office. The messages were sent, but by some oversight, nothing was said about the check signed by Walter Campbell.

CHAPTER XXX.

A CURIOUS CATASTROPHE.

CAPTAIN COOL BLADE doubted greatly whether the oncoming steamboat would make any effort to pick him up, even if he should hail her, and resolved to help himself, thereby running no risk of being left behind. His plan of procedure was almost instantly arranged, and the cool daring with which he carried out the idea, spoke well for his nerve and self-reliance.

Still heading the prow of his frail skiff downstream, so he could watch the progress of the boat, he floated along almost directly in the course of the steamer. This apparently foolhardy conduct was noticed by the crew and a few of the passengers, and that peculiar excitement which attends an anticipated tragedy reigned on board.

It was almost a certainty that the crank skiff would be filled and upset by the short, curling waves that flowed from under the huge, swiftly-revolving wheels. And from each of the three decks, excited witnesses were shouting hasty and conflicting directions to the man who appeared so frightened by the impending danger as to be paralyzed beyond the power of using his oars.

But Captain Cool Blade knew what he was about, and as the pilot of the steamboat veered a little to one side, he followed by a short stroke that carried his skiff to within twice its length of the wheel-house, rendering swamping almost certain.

The boat swept on—the first of the angry waves tossed the frail skiff, and then Captain Cool Blade bent stoutly to his oars, seemingly intent upon running into the after quarter of the huge hull. Instead, he passed behind, fairly grazing the rudder nearest him, then dropped the oars and sprung out upon the rudder, grasping the iron bar that connected the two, and climbing from it into the yawl that swung from the davits above.

The skiff he had deserted was almost instantly overturned by the short, chopping waves, and an excited cry went up from those aboard, who believed that the anticipated tragedy had actually occurred.

Several men sprung to the stern, meaning to lower the yawl, but Captain Cool Blade was before them, and nimbly crossed over the guards. As he did so, he stood face to face with Walter Campbell!

The surprise was mutual, and both men instinctively recoiled, each mechanically feeling for a weapon as their gaze met.

Of the two, Captain Cool Blade was undoubtedly the most thoroughly astounded, yet he was the first to recover his wonted composure, in outward seeming, at least. He did not believe that Campbell could connect him with the robbery at Colby's Landing, since he had worked behind the scenes entirely. Though he burned to put a bullet through the man who had so bitterly insulted him when he was bound and helpless, he resolved to bide his time unless a fight was absolutely forced upon him. He was playing for an enormous stake, and could not run the risk of figuring as a principal in another lynching affair.

"Wait until we get upon dry land again, Mr. Campbell," he said, coolly, bringing his empty and open hands before him. "Then we can settle our little dispute as gentlemen should, with pleasant deliberation, and without the victor being lynched or bundled ashore a thousand miles from anywhere. How is it? A truce or a fight?"

Walter Campbell was not anxious to precipitate matters. Though undoubtedly a bold man, he did not burn to sacrifice his own life merely to gratify a prejudice, and he knew that, even if his first shot should prove fatal, Captain Cool Blade could still slay him. He did not even suspect that the adven-

turer whom he had assisted to put ashore from the War Eagle, was at all connected with the events which had transpired at Colby's Landing and in the swamp adjacent. It will be remembered that Hortense preserved the secret of her sex and identity until long after Campbell had escaped, only being recognized after death.

"You will find me ready for you at all times, and in any way, shape or manner," he said, stiffly, thrusting back his half-drawn pistol, but not removing his hand. "If you wish, we will call it a truce until after we reach Orleans."

"That will suit me best. I'll not offer you my life, for I mean to kill you, some day, and whatever my faults, I am no hypocrite."

Campbell bowed shortly, and turned away. These words had been spoken quickly and in low tones, so that their purpose had been lost upon all save the two more immediately concerned.

Captain Cool Blade knew the officers of the steamboat intimately, and felt no hesitation in telling a portion of the truth by way of explaining his strange *entree*. He told them of his quarrel with Jules Beaufort over the card-table, and of the duel which ensued. Also of how he had been "marooned," but there the truthful story ended. He said that he concluded to return to his old stamping-grounds, despite the yellow fever, and growing tired of waiting for a descending steamer, bought a skiff, provisioned it and struck out down-river. Wearying of this working his own passage, he took the chances and boarded the Netawaka.

He found several of his friends aboard, and in a short time succeeded in obtaining a suit of tolerably fitting garments, to replace those he wore, which were a good deal soiled by all he had undergone.

He made good use of his time, and learned that Walter Campbell had come on board at a wood-yard, the night before. He also learned the story of the planter's escape, and found out that Campbell had made known all that occurred at Colby's Landing.

It was all-important for him to learn what plans Campbell had formed, and this work he delegated to the friend who furnished him with the clothes. He ran no risk in doing so, for the man was a member of the Family, and bound to obey the orders of his chief. He was of good address, cool and quick-witted, and possessed the advantage of being an acquaintance of the planter he was to spy upon.

Campbell was ready enough to talk, and knowing no reason why he should keep his own counsel, only a few minutes elapsed before the spy was in full possession of the plans he had formed.

These were simple enough. The boat was drawing near to one of the river cities where telegraphic connections were made, and though the boat had neither freight nor passengers to land there, Campbell had induced the captain to change his mind, for a consideration, and consent to land there long enough for Campbell to send off a dispatch stopping the payment of the check he had been forced to sign.

At the date treated of, the country was not, as now, a perfect network of railroads and telegraph wires, nor could an office be found at every little hamlet and village, these being confined to the larger towns and cities. Hence it was that Campbell had traveled so far without being able to send off a message to his bankers.

Captain Cool Blade and his ally discussed the question of what must be done, in all its bearings, but could discover no more feasible plan than the following: when Campbell landed, they were to do the same, and prevent his sending the message or returning to the boat at all hazards. Just how this should be done, must be left to the decision of the moment, since it was impossible to look far enough ahead to form a more definite plan.

As the boat came in sight of the city, the two conspirators made their preparations to land, though the captain warned them that they would run the risk of being left.

Campbell was too excited to notice them, or to think of anything save the dispatching his message.

The landing was a work of time and no little difficulty, for the current of the river had suddenly changed with the formation of a bar opposite the city, and the insidious waters had washed away the greater portion of the wharf and levee, running like a mill-race at the foot of the ruins.

The captain growled not a little, but he had passed his word, and would not go back on his bargain.

Several of the hands scrambled ashore as best they could, when the boat swung around and puffed alongside the bank, now a dozen feet high. The boat was made fast, and the narrow gang-plank run out. At this instant the huge cable began to slip, not having been fastened properly, and the swift current to carry the boat down the stream. The pilot rung for the engines to go ahead, and the huge wheels began once more to revolve.

The three men who were to land, apparently did not notice this fact—Campbell certainly did not—and started up the steep plank just as it began to slip and the boat's head to move away from shore with the loosening of the hawser.

Under the circumstances, it was nowise strange that an accident should occur—and that is precisely what did happen.

Campbell was in advance, and one of his feet slipped—not enough to endanger himself alone, but it appeared to throw Captain Cool Blade, who was close behind the planter, wholly off his balance, and then—just how it happened no one could explain clearly—all three of the men fell from the gang-plank down into the agitated waters between the bank and the hull of the boat!

The wildest excitement ensued. It was almost certain that the unfortunate wretches would be swept under the revolving wheel, where they would be pounded into a shapeless mass by the heavy buckets. The chances were a thousand to one against their escape alive, though the wheels were stopped as soon as possible, and the yawl at the stern dropped into the water.

Then a loud yell proclaimed the fact of a single body being seen floating down the current!

CHAPTER XXXI.

REAPING THE HARVEST.

HALF a dozen men hastily tumbled into the boat and pulled after the floating body, almost running down in that ill-regulated ardor so common upon

such occasions, but the seemingly drowned person was finally dragged into the boat, when the discovery was made that it was Captain Cool Blade. And, though an hour was spent in searching for the two other unfortunates, neither of the bodies were ever recovered. Doubtless they had been instantly killed by the revolving wheel, and never rose to the surface. Such was the general belief, and there is no doubt but what one-half of it was truth.

When the seemingly lifeless body of Captain Cool Blade was carried on board the steamboat, those who undertook to restore him, noticed the livid traces of finger-prints upon his throat, that spoke plainly of a terrible struggle under water.

In a few minutes Captain Cool Blade recovered his senses sufficiently to show that his life was in no immediate danger, and then was called upon to explain the meaning of those tell-tale marks.

"I am but little wiser than the rest of you, on that score," he said, tenderly fingering his scarred throat. "All I can say is that when Mr. Campbell slipped, his foot struck my ankle, and made me lose my balance. As I fell into the water, one of the two men grappled with me, and before I knew it, had me by the throat. Even in that moment, I thought of the wheel, and knew that unless we sunk deep enough, we would be crushed by the buckets.

"In such situations, men are apt to think quick, if they think at all, and will fight hard for their own lives. I had no grudge against either of the men—indeed, Harvey was one of my best friends—nor do I know which one of them it was that had me by the throat. However, it would have been the same if it had been my own father—for life is sweet.

"I was underneath, and doubled up my feet until they rested against the man's breast. Then I flung all the force I could into the effort, and kicked him loose, though it seemed as though he had taken my throat and windpipe with him.

"The effort pushed me down until I struck bottom, and that is the last I can remember until I awoke and found myself here, on board."

There was some truth in this explanation, but a few words will serve to make it still clearer.

Until he saw the foot of his enemy slip, Captain Cool Blade had formed no other plan than that already detailed, but now, without pausing to consider the risk he, himself, would be running, he saw his opportunity and promptly seized it. His fall had been intentional, not accidental, and he took care that Walter Campbell should fall with him. Being in a measure prepared, the fall did not materially shock him, and he grappled with Walter Campbell the moment they struck the water, at the same time sinking down as deep as possible in order to avoid the paddle-wheel.

Though severely throttled himself, he did not relax his grip until assured that his enemy was put beyond the power of injuring him any further, then he arose to the surface. His insensibility was cunningly feigned, and while being conveyed to the steamboat, he arranged his story so that no blame could be cast upon him, even if the body of the planter should be discovered. The finger-marks upon his own throat, would be his justification.

The result proved how well he had reasoned. Even those who liked him least, fully acquitted him of all blame in the matter. It had been an unfortunate accident, nothing more.

Captain Cool Blade felt reasonably safe, now that Walter Campbell was out of the way, and took matters easily during the remainder of the voyage to the Crescent City. He did not believe that another one of the prisoners could have effected an escape, and even if the passengers aboard the Netawaka should repeat the strange story told by Walter Campbell, he would take care that the checks were all presented for payment before the bank officials could possibly suspect anything was wrong.

He was the first passenger to spring ashore when the Netawaka reached her destination, and though he avoided the appearance of undue haste, he entered the first hack that presented itself and bade the negro driver convey him to the office of Levi Sharp, giving the street and number, promising him double fare if the trip was made in ten minutes.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, when Captain Cool Blade stood before Levi Sharp, a short, but handsome Jew, who he decided should be his agent in this matter. Though he felt tolerably confident that there would be no trouble about cashing the checks, the adventurer was too wise to run unnecessary risks, or do aught that might make New Orleans, where he was obliged to pass so much of his time in the interests of the League, too hot for him.

Levi Sharp was known to almost every financier in the city, doing heavy business as a bill discount and usurer in general to the planters who needed advances on their crops. A better man to present such large drafts could not well be found.

Though a member of the League, and therefore under the orders of the captain, Levi Sharp would enter no job blindfolded, and knowing this well from past experience, Captain Cool Blade gave a rapid sketch of the manner in which he became possessed of the checks, though time was passing rapidly, and the hour was at hand for the closing of the banks.

The little Jew was fully able to appreciate any stroke of positive genius, and went into ecstasies over the bold and telling stroke dealt his enemies by Captain Cool Blade. He accepted the commission without a moment's hesitation, feeling confident that no rumor of the "financial *coup*" at Colby's Landing had gained circulation in the city as yet.

"Stop at the Planters' Bank, first, and cash this check signed by Walter Campbell. Take a hack—there is the one I used still waiting at the door—and don't spare horse-flesh. Take the amount in bills. Gold will be too bulky to handle, and we may have to light out of this in a hurry. Cash that check first, then go and do the same with this one signed Thomas Warren. Here are two others on the same bank, and if there is time, you can take them out, also. Now go—and don't go to sleep on the road. Cash these four, and we will be sure of fifty thousand, at any rate."

The little Jew nodded, and hastened away. No fear but what he would do his best, since he was to receive five per cent on all the checks cashed.

A short, rapid drive took him to the corner above the Planters' Bank, and bidding the hack-driver await

his return, he hastened into the bank. With a nod to the cashier, whom he knew intimately, Mr. Sharp passed the check across the counter.

Despite the risk he was running, he betrayed no outward evidence of agitation, and not a muscle changed as he saw the cashier start, as though surprised at something. Levi Sharp had concocted a plausible story in case suspicion should be aroused, but he was too wary to volunteer any information, nor did the cashier ask any questions. The signature was a difficult one to counterfeit, and was undoubtedly genuine. Satisfied on this point, he simply asked which Mr. Sharp would prefer, gold or notes, and on being informed, rapidly counted out the amount.

Levi Sharp crammed the bundle of notes into his satchel and left the bank, only the bright gleam in his black eyes betraying his delight.

He hastened to the other bank, left the hack at a short distance as before, and feeling quite confident that there was no danger of detection, passed three checks, that signed by Thomas Warren on top, over the counter.

More from habit than from suspicion, he eyed the cashier keenly, though covertly, as the latter rapidly glanced over the slips of paper. But the official smiled cheerfully at him as he blandly asked which he preferred, notes or gold, adding:

"You are barely in time, Mr. Sharp, and only that you are such a good customer, we should have to request you to call in the morning. Our rules are very stringent, but are elastic enough to stretch a point in favor of our friends."

"The drafts were left with me for collection," glibly responded the Jew. "My client prefers notes, as he is about to buy up cotton through the interior, where he will need the ready money, and thirty thousand dollars in gold would be rather hard on a man's suspenders."

The cashier laughed softly at Mr. Sharp's little joke, and dextrously ran over the pile of bank-notes for the second time before pushing them across the counter. Plainly enough he had no suspicions of the truth, and Mr. Sharp laughed in his sleeve as he counted the notes.

His feelings might have been less delightful, had he known that the cashier, on first catching sight of the signature of Thomas Warren, had touched a hidden wire that rung a small bell in the directors' room, telling the two detectives in plain clothes who waited there, that the bird of prey had fluttered into the snare.

Mr. Sharp stowed away the money and left the bank, entering the hack in waiting and bidding the sable Jehu drive back to his office, where, ten minutes later he was telling Captain Cool Blade the story of his complete success.

It was known at the bank that Mr. Sharp must be acting as the agent of some one else, since he had not been absent from the city, and in hopes of catching the real criminal, the money was paid and the detectives followed the hack. As already seen, Sharp made no efforts to double, and the officers found no difficulty to enter the office, where they leveled their cocked revolvers at the heads of the two astonished men.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A COOL BLADE.

"You are our prisoners, gentlemen, dead or alive!" quietly uttered the detective who entered the little room first, and his words were emphasized by a cocked and leveled revolver.

Two criminals were never more thoroughly confounded than were Captain Cool Blade and Levi Sharp. Nothing had occurred to arouse their suspicions. They had been paid fifty thousand dollars without a word of protest or question asked. They believed themselves so perfectly secure that this unexpected move literally paralyzed them both for the time being.

Captain Cool Blade was the first to recover himself, and his first impulse was to leap upon, not the officer, but Levi Sharp, who he believed had betrayed him, and led the detectives to where he was awaiting the result. But this impulse was only momentary, for the first glance showed him that he had wrongly suspected the little Jew. No living actor could have counterfeited that expression of utter amazement and consternation.

"It's no use, captain," quickly added the detective, misinterpreting the glance. "We have got you foul this time, and any attempt at cutting up rusty, can only result in your own hurt. Our orders are to take you, dead or alive, and though I should mightily hate to do it, I will put a blue pill through you at the first ugly motion."

Captain Cool Blade saw that the man meant every word he uttered, and from past experience he knew that any attempt at escape on his part would be rewarded by instant death. With the air of one who has concluded to make the best of a bad bargain, he said, almost cheerfully:

"Those are hard words, Jamison, but I know you would not utter them unless you believed you had good cause. Of course it is all a ridiculous mistake; but you may as well tell what it is about. On what charge do you arrest us?"

The officer nodded significantly toward the pile of bank-notes which lay upon the office table.

"They were honestly come by," laughed Captain Cool Blade. "A pack of cards is more profitable than a policeman's club, Jamison. I made a short but paying trip, this time."

"A trip that will end in the jug, I'm afraid. The whole story is out, captain. Word was sent down by telegraph concerning all that occurred at Colby's Landing, and though we didn't expect to catch you, we have been on the look-out for those checks these two days past. It's a worse ending than I could wish you, captain, but we must run you in."

This speech told the adventurer that all was known and that his grand *coup* had utterly failed. Still he was determined to escape before he could be brought to trial. He thought of attempting to bribe the officers, but only for an instant. He knew them too well for that. They were incorruptible.

Despite the advantage they had, and their own tested courage, both of the detectives were a little anxious. The captain was no ordinary man, and they would not feel comfortable until he was safe under their lock and key.

"I hate to do it, captain," added Jamison. "but

our orders are very strict. I'm afraid we'll have to put the bracelets on you."

"Not unless you kill me first!" impulsively cried Captain Cool Blade, an ugly light in his eyes and a red spot burning upon each cheek. "I am willing to go with you peaceably, for I can easily prove that this charge is a put up job, but I'll not be taken through the streets like a felon, until I have been proved one. Unless," he added, as though on second thought, "you will call a close carriage. In that, I won't mind so much."

"Intended to propose the same thing," promptly responded the officer, plainly relieved more than he would have cared to express in words. "Our orders forbid our running the slightest unnecessary risk, and you must don the darbies, but you shall have all the secrecy you wish."

"Good enough; I'll not forget your consideration, Jamison, or Keeney. There's a hack at the door that will do. I pledge you my word that I will make no attempt to escape while going from here to the carriage. You can put on the bracelets after we get inside."

The officers plainly would have preferred to handcuff their prisoners before leaving the room, but hesitated to insist upon doing so, after the voluntary pledge given by Captain Cool Blade. That would show they were afraid of the redoubtable adventurer, and though they inwardly acknowledged the fact, they were ashamed to openly confess that fear.

Captain Cool Blade appeared to take their consent for granted, and turning to the table, crowded the bundle of bank-notes into the hand-bag, locking it and handing the key and sachel to Jamison.

"I'll take the key but you may carry the grip-sack," said the officer, smiling grimly. "Not that I doubt your word in the least, but orders are orders. You, Keeney, go out and see that the hack-driver is on the square. You, gentlemen, will please follow him while I bring up the rear."

This programme was duly carried out, and the officers were already secretly congratulating themselves on the success which had attended their venture. Had they known who they were going to arrest, bold as they were, they would not have made the attempt without a strong force in waiting to back them.

Had they caught the brief sentence which Captain Cool Blade whispered into the ear of his companion as they entered the hack, their feelings might have undergone a change. Those words were:

"Watch me, and take care of Keeney."

Captain Cool Blade and Levi Sharp entered the hack first, closely followed by the detectives, Jamison only pausing to bid the driver take them to the station-house.

"Pull down the blinds, Jamison," said the captain, the moment the door was closed and the hack started off. "We might as well have walked, as travel in this style. I don't want to be made a show of."

The detective obeyed, but it proved an unlucky move for him. Captain Cool Blade dealt him a terrific blow with his clenched fist under the ear, that knocked him back into the seat, senseless. At the same time the adventurer grasped his revolver and turned its muzzle toward the second officer. But Levi had obeyed orders, and wresting the pistol from Keeney's hand, caught him by the hair and doubled his head down between the seats with a force that would not be denied. The man was unable to utter a sound above his breath, much less to struggle effectually.

Captain Cool Blade saw that the little Jew was equal to the occasion, and as the carriage rolled along without cessation, he knew that the driver had not caught the sound of the brief struggle.

Imitating the voice of Jamison, he called to the driver and bade him drive out of the city to the shell-road. The negro, suspecting nothing, obeyed without a question, and satisfied with his success thus far, Captain Cool Blade proceeded to make sure of his captives.

He slipped a pair of handcuffs which he found in Jamison's pockets, around that worthy's wrists, and then bade Sharp allow his prisoner to arise.

Strangled beyond the power of speech, Keeney painfully straightened up, and Levi held the officer's own pistol under his nose while Captain Cool Blade adjusted the handcuffs. Not satisfied with this precaution he tied a large, hard knot in a handkerchief and effectually gagged the detective, then served Jamison in the same manner.

"That was a tight box, but I reckon we are out of it, nicely," he said, with a low, mocking laugh.

"I don't see much to be thankful about," grumbled Sharp. "The city will be too hot for us after this, and I will lose every cent I am worth!"

"You would be worse off in the jug," retorted the captain. "I will give you fifteen thousand dollars to start with, and you will never look for fresh pigeons to pluck. But I don't want to be taken too far from the city. I must tell the man to drive more slowly."

This he did, in the voice of Jamison, and the order was obeyed.

By this time the detective had recovered sufficiently from the stunning blow to comprehend how completely the tables had been turned. But the knotted handkerchief in his mouth prevented him from uttering his sentiments.

As they rode slowly on, Captain Cool Blade warned them to be careful what report they made at headquarters, and swore that if his name was even hinted at in connection with the affair, their lives would not be worth a day's ransom.

He caused the negro to drive back and forth along the shell-road until the sun went down and it grew dusk, then he told Levi Sharp the plans he had formed. The money was divided in the proportion agreed upon, and then the feet of the detectives were bound firmly together in such a manner that they could not kick.

Stopping the hack, the two men alighted, and to make sure that the driver's suspicions should not be aroused, they put the plan Captain Cool Blade had arranged into execution.

After a few moments' absence, he returned and told the driver that they had determined to drive out to Pinger's, a then noted house of entertainment far out on the shell-road. While giving these directions, Levi Sharp pretended to enter the hack, but instead, slipped around to the rear and crouched low down upon the ground.

Captain Cool Blade, still personating the officer,

repeated his instructions, adding that as they were in no hurry, he, the driver, might take his time, then bore himself heavily upon the step as though entering. Instead of doing so he slammed the door heavily, slipped under the hack, and had the satisfaction of seeing the driver move on with his captive passengers.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CRUSHING BLOW.

CAPTAIN COOL BLADE apparently accepted this remarkable escape as quite a matter of course, nor did his companion appear at all elated—if anything the contrary. Thus, though from very different causes, the two men lost no time in self-gratulation. Captain Cool Blade was so used to success where he once made up his mind to conquer—had fought death and captivity so often hand to hand—that he dismissed the matter from his mind without an effort.

Levi Sharp was differently constituted. He thought far more of what he had lost than of what he had gained. He knew that his lucrative business in the Crescent City was forever ruined. However careful the two detectives might keep their tongues from implicating Captain Cool Blade, they would spare no pains to hunt him down, and would be doubly vindictive because their personal sense of safety would not allow them to wreak their vengeance upon the first-named.

The little Jew felt that his master had injured him, and therefore was in no wise loth to accept the proposal made by Captain Cool Blade the moment the sound of wheels died away along the shell-road.

"We'll walk back until we come to a light; then I'll give you fifteen thousand dollars. It will be best for us to separate, and each go our own way. There may be no danger until Jamison and Keeney can return to town—which will not be much before day-dawn—or there may be other traps set for us. If you take my advice, you will not lose much time. Better lose some of your property than to lose the whole, in addition to your liberty."

Levi Sharp made no reply. He was not fool enough to utter all that was at his tongue's end. While he felt as he did, utter silence was the best.

Captain Cool Blade strode rapidly along the road, paying little attention to his sullen companion. His brain was busied with matters of far more importance. He was thinking of the trap that had been set for him, into which he had so easily fallen. He knew that the revelation had not come from the lips of Walter Campbell. Was there another traitor among his band, or had Hortense failed in the duty he had assigned her? A suspicion of the truth flashed across his mind, but he quickly banished it. He would not even think of such a calamity.

The money was divided, and the two men parted. Captain Cool Blade hastened into the city, and made the best of his way to the shop of a costumer, with whom he had more than once had dealings.

The little Frenchman recognized his signal, and silently conducted the captain into a private room, where there was no fear of interruption or eaves-dropping. Here the adventurer made known his wants with the full assurance that they would be promptly supplied. Nor was his confidence misplaced. The little costumer was an artist in his peculiar line, and knowing from past experience that the captain had a liberal hand, he excelled himself on this occasion.

Instead of the dashing gambler, a tall, round-shouldered, saw-toothed, hay-colored haired old man came forth from the private room, the very picture of an unpolished planter from the "clay-eating" districts of Georgia, from his slouched hat down to his alligator-hide boots. His own wife, had she been living, would hardly have known him, so complete was the metamorphosis.

Feeling proof against recognition, Captain Cool Blade paid a visit to the steamboat offices and learned that the Glasgow was to pull out at early dawn, the next morning, and at once secured a berth aboard. This settled, he went to a hotel and quietly slept away the hours until it was time to take the boat.

Despite the soundness with which he had reposed through the night just past, Captain Cool Blade was extremely ill at ease, not on his own account—but because of his wife. That she must have proved unable to carry out his instructions, the fact that the payment of the checks had been stopped by telegraph was ample proof. But had there been anything more than failure? He feared there must have been, for neither Hortense nor the men under her command were likely to yield tamely, without a stout fight.

Yet even his worst forebodings did not go as far as the whole truth.

As the disguised gambler passed over the gang-plank and stepped aboard the steamer Glasgow, he fairly brushed shoulders with Jamison and Keeney, the police officers whom he had so dexterously turned the tables upon a few hours before.

The negro driver had leisurely proceeded to Pinger's as directed, and drew up before the door, with his customary flourish. Delighted with the rich fare that had fallen to his lot, he jumped nimbly down from his seat and opened the door. His amazement may be better imagined than described when he saw that his four passengers had dwindled down to two, and they both bound, gagged and handcuffed.

There is no occasion to dwell upon the scene that followed. "The army in Flanders" would have hung its united head in speechless despair, and the time-honored proverb would have been blotted from their tattered banners by tears of envy at hearing the raging flood of sulphureous eloquence that poured forth from the unlocked jaws of the two outwitted detectives. As there was no one else whom they could possibly blame, they pitched upon the dumb-founded negro, accusing him of being in the plot; but finally they re-entered the hack and made all possible speed to the city. Here they told the whole story, and had the entire police force on the alert inside of an hour. They caught Levi Sharp, whose cupidity would not suffer him to flee without one effort to save at least a portion of his property. The steamboats were closely watched, but the Glasgow pulled out on time, without the detectives catching the bird they sought, though Captain Cool Blade stood close beside them for nearly a half-hour.

On that trip up the river, Captain Cool Blade was fated to suffer the tortures of the damned.

The story of the robbery at Colby's Landing, the pursuit and defeat of the bold criminals, the rescue of a portion of the prisoners, and above all the death of a woman in the guise of a man, who was believed to be the leader of the outlaws—all this had been telegraphed to the "Picayune," and now formed the general topic of discussion aboard the Glasgow. It was rumored that the body of the dead woman had been recognized, and the almost forgotten story of her romantic honeymoon as the bride of the notorious Captain Cool Blade was revived and plentifully embellished. It was also declared that the captain was the real author of the outrage, and the officers of the law were called upon to speedily bring the criminal to the bar of justice.

A thousand times during the journey, Captain Cool Blade was tempted to throw off his disguise and punish some ribald speaker who was airing his eloquence on the subject of the outlaw's wife, but one thought as often restrained him. His life, if this terrible story was a true one, no longer belonged to himself. He must avenge her—must find out the man whose hand had laid her low; and until then he could only wait, marking down each man whose tongue was pointed by malice, for a future object of attention.

Yet, despite his enforced calmness, and the persistence with which he strove to believe that the report had no foundation in truth, Captain Cool Blade was fully ten years older when he left the Glasgow at the wood-yard a few miles below Colby's Landing. He did not deem it prudent to proceed direct to the latter place, lest a trap should have been set for him, but pressed on and closely inspected the premises first.

A familiar signal soon brought out Amariah Colby, who, though in fear and trembling, told his master everything that had occurred during his absence.

How Hortense had met her death at the hand of Percy Talfourd; how she had failed to slay Mrs. Beaufort; how the party had departed on board the Magnolia, with Jules Beaufort still living; and how he and his men had given the body of the ill-fated woman a decent burial.

Through it all Captain Cool Blade listened in stony silence. Not a sound came from his lips until Amariah Colby concluded, though the sweat of bitter agony stood in great drops upon his brow. Then, in a low, strained voice that made the swamp-magnate tremble as though he heard the dead speaking to him, the captain bade him lead the way to the spot where his wife was buried.

Colby obeyed, but as Captain Cool Blade sunk upon his knees beside the oblong mound, he fled in haste from the spot to shut out from his ears the fearful curse that poured from the bereaved gambler's lips!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FLUTTERING INTO THE SNARE.

NEARLY six weeks had elapsed since the tragic scenes which occurred at Colby's Landing.

The Magnolia made the trip to St. Louis in safety, without any event worthy of record, at least to those who had played a part in this chronicle. Both Jules Beaufort and his wife had survived the passage, and were now living in a comfortable house on Walnut St., in St. Louis. They were neither of them in fit condition to endure the unavoidable bustle and noise which reigns in a hotel, and Percy Talfourd had, at their request, rented the building they now occupied, for the summer.

The surgeon's prediction in the case of Mrs. Beaufort, had been fulfilled. Though still somewhat feeble, she had almost entirely recovered from the wounds inflicted by the dying wife of Captain Cool Blade.

Not so with Jules Beaufort. The double wound he had received from his bitter enemy, refused to heal. He had been severely injured in the explosion, and, though he did not appear to grow any worse, neither did he improve. His constitution had been so terribly shattered by the hard drinking and other excesses of the past, that he was unable to rally. Though the physicians in attendance uttered the usual formulas, they well knew that the broken-down planter would never be a well man again, even if he ever arose from his bed.

Percy suspected this, though he kept it from Marie, and encouraged her hopes as much as possible. He had so far prevailed upon her to name a not very distant day for their wedding, and in the meantime he was doing all that lay in his power to make her life pleasant, foreseeing the time when sorrow must crush her spirits.

On the evening when we take up the thread of our story once more, the young couple were going to the theater, for the first time since their arrival in St. Louis. An apparent improvement in the condition of her father, added to the persuasions of her lover, had induced Marie to give her consent. This was the first time they had either of them felt justified in spending an evening away from home, since their arrival, and their spirits were very light, for they little thought of all the pain and trouble that night was fated to bring forth.

As they alighted from the carriage and entered the vestibule of the theater, Marie uttered a little cry of fear, and clung tremblingly to Percy's arm.

"I saw a face—the face of the man who shot poor father!" she murmured, in answer to his solicitous inquiries. "There by the lamp-post—"

Talfourd glanced keenly around, but could discover nothing to cause alarm, and reassured Marie as best he could, finally convincing her that she must have been misled by her fancy. It was not at all likely that Captain Cool Blade was in St. Louis, but even if he should be, they had no cause to be alarmed.

It is easy to be convinced even against our own senses, where one truly loves, and in a brief space of time Marie had quite recovered from her scare.

During this little bit of by-play, Percy Talfourd had diverted attention from his fair charge, by pretending to be arranging her opera cloak, while reassuring her, thus avoiding anything like a scene. And now they ascended the broad flight of steps that carried them to the entrance of the dress circle.

Had Talfourd been a little less confident in his belief that their enemy was far away from that spot, perhaps the current of after-events might have been

wholly changed. For the face that had so startled Marie Beaufort, was indeed that of Captain Cool Blade, who drew back into the shadows as he saw that he was recognized, though maintaining a position from whence he could note the further actions of the young couple.

He saw the fruitless glance of the planter, and as they proceeded up the stairs, he hastily purchased a ticket and followed them, keeping his soft hat slouched over his face in order to guard against recognition in case Talfourd should glance behind him. But this precaution proved unnecessary. Percy had already forgotten the matter, and leisurely proceeded to their seats, in blissful ignorance of the fact that the bitterest enemy they either of them had on earth, was keeping a close watch upon them from the door, and carefully noting the position they occupied.

A few minutes later, Percy did glance around, but then the dark figure had vanished.

The orchestra played an overture, then the curtain slowly arose, and the play began. It was a new one to them both, an emotional drama of absorbing interest, and for the time being all else was forgotten as they watched the progress of the piece. Then the curtain fell upon the first act, and the lovers, with a long breath, returned to real life once more.

They scarce had time to exchange a few remarks on what they had witnessed, when a hand was placed upon Talfourd's shoulder. He recognized a Frederick Fulton, whom he was slightly acquainted with, and marveled at the gravity upon the young planter's face as he requested a word with him in private.

"It's of the utmost importance, and I trust Miss Beaufort will accept that fact as a valid excuse for my seeming rudeness," Fulton said, in a low tone, by way of explanation.

Talfourd excused himself, and followed Fulton away from the crowd, near the entrance.

"What is the matter?" he demanded, striving in vain against a premonition of coming evil. "One would think you had come from a graveyard—"

"I came from a death-bed, which is almost as bad," was the sober response. "It was a lucky chance that led me past your house, on Walnut street this evening, for a servant who used to be in my employ, rushed out in great haste, and recognizing me, told me that he was going for the doctor, that his master, Mr. Beaufort was dying. He added that after he had found the doctor, he was to hasten for you to the theater. Just then Mrs. Beaufort came to the door, and recognized me. I volunteered to fetch you, and she accepted, but begged me to keep the fact a secret from her daughter—that it might possibly be a false alarm, and at all events, her presence could only add to the trouble and grief."

"I lost no time in coming here, and have engaged a hack for you. It stands right in front of the entrance, with a man at the door. You cannot miss it. You will gain time by taking it. If you will allow me, I will see after Miss Beaufort until the play is over, or until you can return for her."

The young planter was almost stunned by this revelation, coming when he was so perfectly happy, and saw nothing suspicious in the story.

Fulton had been remarkably considerate, and had arranged for everything. He thanked him hurriedly and begged him to follow, and he would place the young lady in his charge.

This Percy did, controlling his voice and features as perfectly as possible under such a sudden call.

"I will soon return, Marie," he whispered; "until then Mr. Fulton will remain with you. I am sure you will neither of you regret the substitution."

Then he was gone, but in his endeavor to be careless and natural, he had rather overdone the matter, and as Marie collected her scattered faculties, she felt sure that something was wrong.

Those seated near by, had noticed the little episode, but as the orchestra began another tune, their attention was quickly diverted.

Under cover of the music Marie began to question Mr. Fulton as to what evil tidings he had brought. For a few minutes he parried her queries, but so clumsily that her fears grew greater with the passage of each moment.

Then he changed suddenly, saying:

"I do not think it is right that you should be kept in ignorance of the truth through mistaken kindness, Miss Beaufort. If you will permit me, I will escort you home. Your father is dying!"

Then the power of true blood showed itself. Not a sound escaped the maiden's lips, and she drew the veil over her face to conceal her deathly paleness as she arose, and gasped:

"For the love of Heaven, take me home!"

In silence Frederick Fulton drew her trembling hand through his arm and led her toward the door. The motion appeared to restore her strength, and she hastened down the stairs and through the vestibule. A close carriage was in waiting before the entrance, and Fulton handed her in, following after giving the driver a direction—not to Walnut street, however!

The fair bird had fluttered into the fowler's snare!

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORE SURPRISES THAN ONE.

CAPTAIN COOL BLADE, over the grave of his dead wife, swore a fearful oath of vengeance upon her destroyer, in connection with the Beaufort family, old and young—an oath so terrible that Amariah Colby fled from the spot with hands on his ears. Nor did the captain allow any grass to grow under his feet. He thought only of revenge, and paid no attention to the fact that he was now an outlaw in reality, a heavy reward being offered for his capture.

He followed his intended victims to St. Louis, but there he lost track of them for nearly a month, finally discovering their place of residence not quite two weeks before the night in question. Though his heart was so filled with hatred the most intense, Captain Cool Blade lost none of his usual coolness and forethought. He would not strike the blow until all was in readiness and utter success assured. There were times during those two weeks, when he could have struck down the unsuspecting young planter with little or no personal risk, but as often he withheld his hand. He would not let Percy Talfourd atone so easily for the blood he had shed.

He should die, but not until he had tasted of the bitter draught which was being so carefully prepared for him.

Through lavish bribing, he corrupted one of the servants, and through him learned that the young couple were intending to spend the evening at the theater. This was the opportunity for which he had been patiently waiting, and he resolved to strike his contemplated blow that same evening.

Here, as frequently before, Captain Cool Blade made use of his high office in the League, to accomplish his private ends. He found plenty of the members of the Family in town, and had only to tell them what portion of the work fell to their lot.

The captain dogged the lovers to the theater, narrowly escaping discovery at the entrance, as already recorded, and watched them settle down in their seats. Then he sought out Frederick Fulton, one of his coadjutors, whose speaking acquaintance with those whom he intended to entrap, rendered him peculiarly fitted for the task assigned him. The young planter dared not refuse, and the reader has already seen how adroitly he carried out his part of the programme.

Percy Talfourd had not the faintest suspicion of the snare that was set for him. He had expected that such would be the end—that the life would go out of Jules Beaufort after a sudden flicker. He was only anxious to spare his loved one as long as possible, and gladly accepted the proposal of Fulton, then hastened down the stairs and out of the theater.

As Fulton said he would, Talfourd found a hack waiting before the entrance, the driver standing beside it, holding open the door. Without the faintest suspicion of what awaited him, Percy hastily entered the carriage, only to receive a crushing blow upon his bowed head that doubled him up in a senseless heap upon the lap of the man who had dealt the treacherous stroke. The driver slammed the door sharply, the noise deadening the gasping groan that escaped from the stricken man's lips, then mounted the driver's seat and the mettled horses trotted swiftly away through the gloom.

Captain Cool Blade was not idle while his assistants were so busily employed. His arrangements had all been made during the day, so there was no time wasted now that it was precious.

The servant in his pay had also performed his duty well, for when Captain Cool Blade gave the agreed-upon signal, the fellow opened the door with prompt silence. He was eager to finger the additional reward promised him, and said:

"All is ready for you. The other servants are asleep, and it would take an earthquake to awaken them. Madame is in her room, resting, asleep, as I believe. Master is alone in his chamber."

"Good! here is your money, double what I promised you. Go and take a dose of the soothing-syrup yourself, as soon as you have pointed out his room. You must not be suspected, as you would be, were you the only one unaffected by the drug."

The covetous rascal could scarcely refrain from kicking up his heels in delight as he stowed away the roll of bank-notes, but he managed to suppress his excitement until after he had conducted the captain to the door of the room occupied by Jules Beaufort.

Captain Cool Blade noiselessly turned the knob and entered the chamber, as silently closing the door behind him. He did not turn the key in the lock, because he did not feel the necessity of taking such a precaution. The one servant who remained unsuspected was faithful to him—or rather his money—and he cared not how soon Mrs. Beaufort should enter.

The wounded man stirred uneasily as the outlaw glided to his bedside and stood gazing down upon him with an evil light in his eyes, stern, unrelenting hatred imprinted upon every feature—a look such as a fallen angel might wear. It seemed as though that basilisk gaze was too powerful for slumber to resist, for Jules Beaufort suddenly opened his eyes with a low gasp of terror as he saw the stranger bending over him.

"Yes, it is I—Henry Peyton, the man whom you hounded to his death—to a living grave—for a crime that your hand committed!" hissed the outlaw, his strong hand pressing the terrified wretch back upon his pillow. "I have waited long for my revenge, but it has come to me at last. Not only will I kill you, but I will deal out even worse than death to your wife and your daughter. I will drag them down to the mire—will make them the scorn and loathing of all honest people; and then I will tell them that they owe it all to their father and husband."

Still holding the wounded man down with a force that he was unconscious of exerting, Captain Cool Blade spoke rapidly, reviving all the bitterness of the past, for the time being a blind, unreasoning maniac. This he surely must have been, else he would have relaxed that deadly pressure—would have seen that he was cheating his own revenge. For Jules Beaufort, or Jacques Bouchier, as he was christened, was dying!

Mrs. Beaufort saw this at the first glance as she opened the door, having been started from an uneasy doze by the sound of voices just below her. She thought that her husband had awakened and was again delirious. She hastened down to his assistance, and now stood for a moment in speechless amazement as she saw the form of a man beside the bed, talking rapidly, menacingly. But only for an instant. She saw more than did the maddened outlaw—saw that her husband was in the agonies of death!

With a piercing scream she sprung forward and caught the man by the arm, tearing away his suffocating hand with a strength lent by the dire emergency—then shrunk away with a low cry of horror as she recognized the husband of her dead cousin—the man who she believed had died in a felon's cell, many long years ago!

Captain Cool Blade grasped her by the shoulder and held a long knife menacingly to her bosom. But the threat that quivered upon his lips was cut short.

With a gasping, gurgling cry, Jules Beaufort rolled out of bed and lay at their feet, a dead man!

The outlaw spurned the corpse with his boot, then turned once more to the terror-stricken woman, overwhelming her with a flood of fiery words, tearing the veil from the misty past, and showing her

how foully he had been dealt with by the false friend who had just died a dog's death.

"I swore to have vengeance upon him and his. He hid himself under a false name, but I found him at last. He is dead—he is spared the tortures I meant to inflict upon him—but you are living—you and his daughter and her lover—curse him! He murdered my wife—my brave, faithful, loving Hortense! shot her down as though she were a mad-dog! He shall die ten thousand deaths in one for that dastardly deed! He shall weep tears of blood—for I will torture him first in the person of those whom he loves as dearly as I loved her! He shall be an eyewitness of their shame—"

Until now, Mrs. Beaufort had been as one paralyzed, but a glimmer of the truth pierced her befogged brain, and she tremblingly asked him whom he meant—who was the man he threatened?

"Percy Talfourd—the lover of your—and his—daughter!" was the fierce response. "He killed my wife—shot her down like a wild beast! But he shall suffer a frightful death for every hair of her head! He is in my power—he and your daughter, the fair young girl whom he loves—"

A wailing cry burst from the tortured woman's lips.

"Spare her! BEFORE HEAVEN SHE IS YOUR OWN CHILD!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BLADE IS BROKEN.

THOUGH knocked down and rendered senseless by the swift, strong blow delivered by the man who had been lying in wait for him inside the close carriage, Percy Talfourd did not long remain thus. As often is the case, his reasoning faculties returned to him a few seconds before his purely physical qualities recovered from the shock, and he realized what had befallen him—though the object to be gained by his assailant was still a mystery to him—before the faintest movement on his part could give the stranger any intimation of his revival.

He could tell that he was being driven swiftly through the streets, and that there was only one man in the carriage besides himself. Robbery might be the motive—he could not tell, nor did he pause to consider that point. There could be no doubt that evil was intended him, and with a man of his stout courage, that was sufficient incentive for him to fight against the outrage. No doubt the driver was in the plot, but even then the odds were but two against one.

Thus far the young planter had reasoned before his power of motion returned to him, and in accordance with the desperate resolve he had taken, he controlled his muscles, lying as heavily as though he was still senseless.

It was plain that the man upon whose knees he was lying, suspected nothing of the truth, else he would have been more circumspect in his actions. The lifeless weight soon appeared to discommode him, and he raised the limp form in his arms, trying to prop it up in the corner of the seat opposite.

Percy saw his opportunity, and dashing open the door with one furious kick, he grasped the fellow by the shoulders and hurled him headlong through the opening, following after the next instant.

The driver drew rein abruptly at the sudden commotion, but Talfourd did not care to pause to chastise him, just then. He saw that the man he had flung from the carriage was lying still in a heap, as though stunned, and he made assurance doubly sure by dealing the fellow a heavy kick upon the side of the head as he passed him by, then ran rapidly down the street.

Under any other circumstances he would not have abandoned the half-won field so abruptly, but he began to fear that the cunning plot had not been concocted for himself alone. Fulton had plainly acted as a decoy, since he was so particular in describing the carriage he was to take. After all, might not Marie have been right in declaring she saw the face of Captain Cool Blade at the door? The old-time enemy of Jules Beaufort might be dealing him a fresh blow, through his daughter!

That was as far as he could reason. He forgot that his hand had slain the wife of the daring outlaw. He could only think of the possible danger that threatened his betrothed, and ran at top speed back to the theater—only to find that Fulton and Marie had gone!

An acquaintance who chanced to be seated near by, told him what had occurred: that Frederick Fulton escorted Miss Beaumont from the hall within five minutes after he—Talfourd—left.

Strongly agitated, fearing the worst, Percy Talfourd left the theater and hastened at the top of his speed to the house occupied by the Beaufort family, on Walnut street. As he drew near, he found the usually quiet neighborhood in a state of the greatest excitement. He paused not to ask any questions. He heard more than enough as he ran along, to tell him that there had been a tragedy enacted in the Beaufort mansion.

He dashed through the open door and paused upon the threshold of Jules Beaufort's room. Truly it was a terrible sight that met his bewildered gaze!

There was one man who witnessed the entrance of Captain Cool Blade, besides the treacherous servant. This was a police officer in the pay of Jules Beaufort who, unknown to any of his family, had had his dwelling-place guarded night and day, feeling certain that his bitter enemy would, sooner or later, find him out. It was this fear that, more than his wounds, kept him so low.

The watchman recognized the outlaw, on whose head a price was set, but he was too prudent to attempt the capture alone. He had too great a respect for the prowess of Captain Cool Blade. Still he was resolved not to lose sight of the house, though he made all haste to the next building and sent a note to headquarters by one of the servants, then returned to his post, awaiting reinforcements.

Thus it was that Captain Cool Blade was suffered to taste his cup of vengeance, and even to extract from the lips of Mrs. Beaufort full confirmation of her truly startling announcement that the daughter whom she had so tenderly reared was indeed the child of the outlaw's first wife.

It will be remembered that Harry Peyton and Jacques Bouchier married cousins, on the same day. At the time of the bank robbery, planned by the latter, for the express purpose of betraying his comrade,

both wives were shortly expecting their first confinement. Both were residing upon their husbands' plantations, over a hundred miles from where the robbery and trial took place.

Mrs. Bouchier was confined first, but her child only lived a few days. She wrote to her husband, informing him of the sad fact, but the letter was never received. Mrs. Peyton's child was born on the very night that her husband was brought to trial, and two days later, she expired on being told, incautiously, of her husband's conviction.

The cousins had been more like sisters, and were reared together from early childhood. Mrs. Bouchier gladly took the orphaned child, thus hoping to fill the aching void in her own heart.

Jacques Bouchier was never undeceived. He came home so bitter against his one-time friend that his wife dared not tell him the truth. Their hasty flight from the State helped to keep him in the dark, and he never knew that the daughter he learned to love so passionately, was the child of Henry Peyton. Nor did Marie ever dream that she was really other than she seemed.

Such was the story that Captain Cool Blade listened to, with the body of his long-hated enemy lying dead at his feet. And scarcely had the woman ceased in her startling revelation than the door was again flung hastily open, and half a dozen armed policemen entered the room.

Captain Cool Blade heard the stern command to surrender, but, though he knew that it would be almost impossible to escape alive, he drew a pistol in each hand and leaped forward, firing as he did so.

The struggle was brief but deadly in the extreme. Four more bodies cumbered the floor when all was over, and one of them was Captain Cool Blade—not dead, but dying.

His last breath was spent in telling Mrs. Bouchier where Marie might be found, and the best means of rescuing her unharmed, adding, in a husky whisper:

"Never tell her what you told me; let her live on in ignorance of who her parents really were. And—don't let her—keep her from—cursing me!"

Such was the tableau that met the gaze of Percy Talfourd as he entered the room.

But little more need be added.

The information imparted by the dying outlaw proved correct in all particulars, and long before daylight Marie was returned to her sorrow-stricken mother's arms, unhurt and well, by her devoted lover.

For obvious reasons the whole story was never divulged. It was generally believed that Captain Cool Blade had been killed while attempting to burglarize the Beaufort mansion.

For the same reasons, Frederick Fulton and all of the others, save one, who were concerned in the daring plot, were allowed to go unpunished.

The morning papers contained the account of a well-known Southern planter being found dead upon the street, being badly bruised around the head. Percy Talfourd could have explained the mystery, but he held his peace.

That fall he and Marie were married, but not before Mrs. Beaufort told him her real parentage.

There was another wedding, several months earlier, and though less polished, it was quite as happy and far more uproarious. The big alligator-hunter, Jim Adams, was there, insisting upon being "best man," which wish was duly gratified.

THE END.

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